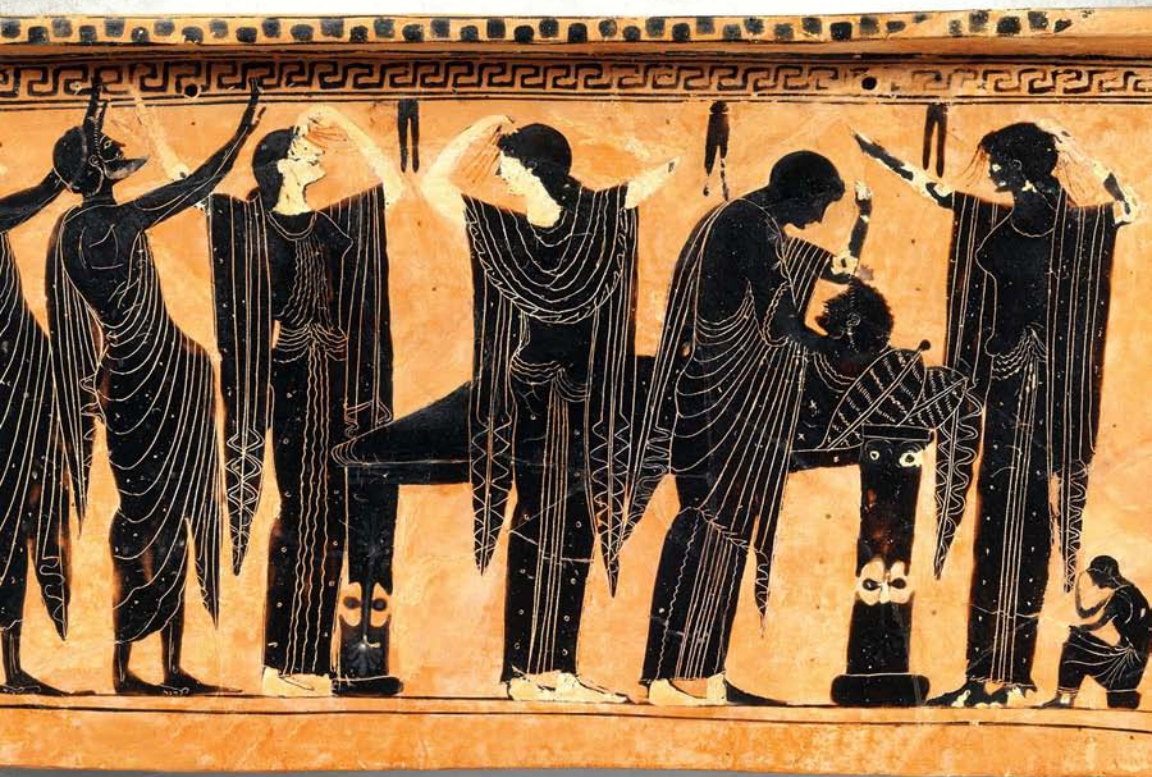


TRAGIC RITES



NARRATIVE
and RITUAL *in*
SOPHOCLEAN
DRAMA

ADRIANA BROOK

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Tragic Rites

Publication of this volume has been made possible, in part,
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Warren G. Moon.

TRAGIC RITES



NARRATIVE and RITUAL
in SOPHOCLEAN DRAMA

ADRIANA BROOK

The University of Wisconsin Press

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For my parents

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Note on Translations and Sources

All Greek text has been sourced from the most recent Oxford Classical Texts, with minor modifications to replace lunate sigmas with medial and terminal sigmas and iota adscripts with iota subscripts. All translations are my own. Abbreviations follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

Tragic Rites



Introduction

Ritual Poetics in the Plays of Sophocles

ἔργου δὲ παντὸς ἦν τις ἄρχηται καλῶς, / καὶ τὰς τελευτὰς εἰκός
ἔσθ' οὕτως ἔχειν

[If one begins every task well, it is likely to end well.]
Sophocles fr. 831 (Lloyd-Jones)

Rituals tell stories. They have characters, plot lines, climaxes, and dénouements. It is no wonder, then, that ritual is integral to the plots of so many great stories. In this book I elucidate the essential role that ritual plays in the stories of Sophocles. I argue that ritual in Sophocles functions as a poetic device, directing the audience's experience of the plot and perception of the characters on the stage. These poetic effects depend on the close analogy between ritual and narrative. Drawing on modern theories of ritual as well as Aristotle's theory of tragedy, I show that both ritual and narrative entail a predictable progression and implicate their participants in a potential change of status, which is often expressed as a function of community membership. Broadly speaking, rituals and narratives advance in the same way toward the same ends. The rituals embedded in Sophoclean plays correspond to elements of plot development and characterization and so contributed to the ancient audience's experience and expectations as spectators of these dramas.

In Sophocles, the close connection between ritual and narrative is clearer in problematic rituals than in model ones. Rituals containing mistakes are also much more common in the corpus than correct ones. Like correct rituals, ritual problems generate expectations about plot progression and character. One ritual might become confused with another, it might repeat excessively, or its participants might

not possess the status necessary to undertake the rite legitimately. In Sophocles, such incorrect, incomplete, and ineffective rituals correspond to and often anticipate elements of the drama. Any deviation from the norm in the ritual's characteristics or progression implies a parallel deviation in the realm of character or plot. I analyze the poetic effects of ritual mistakes using a model of ritual poetics, which theorizes the communicative function of ritual content in a literary context. This analysis affirms the essential role of ritual in Sophoclean narrative and sheds new light on Sophocles' dramatic technique.

Surveying the Field

Ritual is, of course, ubiquitous in the tragedy of fifth-century Athens. The plays of the three Attic masters incorporate both actual rituals and metaphorical ones: that is, actions that are not rituals in a literal sense but are described in such a way as to evoke ritual. Catherine Bell calls this phenomenon "ritualization,"¹ and it is a common occurrence in Greek tragedy. The ritual content of Athenian tragedy has generated an enormous body of scholarship that offers several explanations, none of them mutually exclusive, for the presence of ritual in these dramas and its possible social, religious, and poetic ramifications. One suggestion is that ritual contributed to the theater audience's collective emotional response to the play they were watching.² Ritual is also said to have both established and expressed a sense of community among the characters onstage and among the members of the audience.³ It is similarly proposed that ritual represented a means of negotiating the relationship between gods and mortals, again, for characters and audience alike.⁴ The possible origin of tragedy as a Dionysian ritual suggests that the ritual content of fifth-century tragedy may be the descendant of a historical ritual performance.⁵ And finally, most generally, it is noted that these two modes of performance—tragedy and ritual—share many characteristics, making ritual a natural and logical fit for the tragic stage.⁶ Elements of all these perspectives are evident in the following pages, but predominantly my approach follows from and develops scholarship that focuses on the symbolic and expressive function of ritual in dramatic terms, highlighting especially what a ritual communicates about plot and character in the play in which it occurs.⁷ In this I am indebted to three scholars in particular: Froma Zeitlin, Eveline Krummen, and Albert Henrichs.

In her still widely read and cited 1970 doctoral dissertation, Zeitlin exhaustively catalogs and categorizes the rituals that occur in the extant plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. While Zeitlin's principal achievement is the discernment of meaningful patterns in a huge body of *exempla*, her concluding remarks outline what she perceives to be the unique contributions of ritual to tragedy. These

observations focus largely on the potential symbolic function of ritual in a theatrical context. Ritual, she explains, can express what characters are feeling, can demonstrate or develop the character of agents in the play, can provide a framework for the structure of the narrative, and can be used both proleptically and analeptically to unite actions separated by time and provide clues about further ritual activity in the play.⁸

Although Zeitlin's dissertation offers only brief examples of the communicative function of ritual, her influential articles on the corrupt sacrifice motif, published before the completion of the dissertation, illustrate the analytical value of her approach.⁹ Zeitlin's work shows that references to ritual slaughter pervade Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, causally and aesthetically linking all the murders in the trilogy to the initial sacrifice of Iphigenia and demonstrating that those responsible for this series of murders all share the delusion that their vengeful perpetuation of a cycle of ritual violence is just. Zeitlin's exploration of sacrifice in the *Oresteia* offers a useful model for the analysis of a ritual motif repeated through an entire play or, in this case, a trilogy. Her work in this respect intersects in important ways with my reading of Sophocles' *Electra*.¹⁰

Eveline Krummen offers a more recent consideration of the symbolic and communicative properties of tragic rituals.¹¹ Using Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Trojan Women* as her primary examples, Krummen proposes to elucidate the relationship between ritual action and dramatic structure. She describes how ritual actions generate poetic and metaphorical relationships between different scenes in the same play, often relying on the inherent ambiguity of ritual, particularly the confusion of rituals that are similar in form but used for different purposes. Such rituals, she argues, have a clear symbolic function in their immediate context but are often also part of a series of images that run through the play. Ritual connections between different parts of the drama serve an interpretive or prophetic function, referring the audience back to scenes they have already witnessed and permitting them to predict the outcome of scenes that have not yet occurred. Krummen's work anticipates my own in several ways, particularly the way she links ritual scenes in the *Ajax*, identifying the connections between Ajax's central ritualized suicide and other ritual imagery in the play.¹² More generally, the idea that a ritual in one section of a play can generate meaning by its literal and figurative connections to a ritual in another section is crucial for understanding Sophocles' use of ritual more broadly and is foundational to my approach to this subject.

A final important influence on my argument is Albert Henrichs' work on perversions of ritual in Greek tragedy.¹³ He shows that all three Greek tragedians use rituals to raise and disappoint audience expectations based on an implicit cultural consensus on what constitutes proper ritual procedure. In order to use ritual

to manipulate audience expectations, Henrichs argues, the tragedians were more interested in rituals that were in some way incorrect or incomplete. More specifically, he contrasts Sophocles with Aeschylus and Euripides. While the latter two typically follow through when they foreshadow ritual action, Sophocles frequently frustrates the expectations his plays raise, either by preventing ritual from happening altogether or by assigning it a new religious function and, thus, new dramatic implications.

Briefly examining the *Ajax*, the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and the *Oedipus at Colonus*, he shows that Sophocles' use of a technique that Henrichs calls "ritual nonperformance" contributes both to the construction of the dramatic character of the hero of each play and to the forward momentum of the plot. Ritual in Sophocles thus becomes a poetic tool, denied its literal truth as ritual but validated as a meaningful metaphor. Henrichs' comparison of Sophocles with the other two playwrights makes several points that are important to my own analysis of Sophoclean uses of ritual. In particular, the argument that Sophocles' rituals are usually, in some sense, mistakes and both disappoint the existing expectations of the theater audience and generate new ones is central to my analysis. Henrichs' concluding comments on this topic eloquently articulate how the playwright manipulated ritual to poetic effect.

In tragedy, ritual remedies usually fail, and instead of being the solution, ritual becomes part of the problem. . . . The rituals of tragedy go easily awry, and that is what makes them so dangerous. While tragic rituals are a constant threat to the characters, they are an unqualified boon for the playwrights. Even more so than Aeschylus, Sophocles recognized the enormous dramatic potential of the concept of the ritual crisis and put it to innovative use. While his characters struggle with rituals with which they don't identify and which they cannot control, the playwright reigns supreme over ritual processes that invariably work to his advantage. He is a ritual expert in his own right, and in his experienced hands the rituals of tragedy turn out to be exquisite tools over which the good of the playwright, the dramatic good that is, always prevails.¹⁴

The work of scholars like Zeitlin, Krummen, and Henrichs has contributed greatly to our understanding of the use of ritual in the plays of Sophocles. In particular, these scholars have made a persuasive case for the idea that tragic rituals have dramatic and poetic implications as well as ritual ones. They demonstrate that ritual offers the playwright a rich symbolic language through which to communicate with his theater audience about both plot and character. These authors also suggest

that ritual offers the playwright a means of generating, fulfilling, and disappointing the dramatic expectations of his audience, showing that ritual has the capacity to do a considerable amount of poetic work beyond its religious or social implications in the narrative.

In this book I approach the question of Sophoclean ritual holistically, considering how ritual is used in the entire corpus of extant plays rather than focusing on the few plays with the most overt ritual content. The *Ajax*, in particular, has received a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention; here, it is only one example of the way in which Sophocles uses ritual in all seven plays. Similarly, and in contrast with much previous work on rituals in Sophocles, I emphasize the analysis of entire plays rather than individual ritual scenes. I consider rituals not only in the scenes in which they occur but also as they are foreshadowed and recalled in other parts of the play, drawing on the ideas of both Zeitlin and Krummen to do so. In addition, moving beyond Henrichs' generic ritual perversion and "ritual nonperformance," I identify three types of ritual mistakes that occur consistently throughout the Sophoclean corpus—problems of ritual conflation, ritual repetition, and ritual status—facilitating a more nuanced explanation of how ritual mistakes contributed to an ancient audience's dramatic experience and expectations. Finally, this fresh insight into Sophocles' use of ritual suggests a new approach to the question of Sophoclean closure, focusing on how the audience's ritually driven dramatic perceptions would have influenced their reception of the ambiguity and open-endedness with which the plays of Sophocles typically conclude. In sum, I hope not only to offer a more complete and detailed assessment of Sophocles' use of ritual but also to contribute to the understanding of his dramatic technique more broadly.¹⁵

Defining Sophoclean Rituals

What precisely is meant by the category of ritual is a deceptively simple question fraught with difficulty. Modern theorists have made many attempts to define ritual,¹⁶ but these definitions are generally inappropriate for the present work for one of two contrasting reasons. Some, attempting to account for all rituals in all times, places, contexts, and genres, are too broad and inclusive to be applied meaningfully to the analysis of ritual in a dramatic context.¹⁷ Conversely, more specific and limiting definitions are unable to account for the rituals that occur in fifth-century tragedy, and Sophocles specifically, often because they focus exclusively on ritual process (the participants and the steps they follow during the ritual performance) without theorizing about ritual outcome (what is accomplished through the ritual performance).¹⁸ Ronald Grimes speaks eloquently about the

challenges of devising a definition of ritual, citing the “noticeable division between broad and narrow strategies” and the lack of “general agreement on a single short list of qualifiers” that might be used to define the parameters of the concept.¹⁹

Since this work seeks primarily to understand how an ancient audience would have interpreted the rituals incorporated into Sophocles’ plays, we can at least limit any attempted definition temporally and geographically. Unfortunately, we are on no more stable footing if we seek a definition of ritual to cover only the fifth-century Athenian context, or even just those rituals that occur in the artistic and somewhat stylized context of Greek drama. Part of the problem is that ritual, in one sense, is not an ancient Greek category. There is no word in the ancient Greek language corresponding to what is now referred to as ritual. In ancient Athens, individual rituals were indicated by a specific subset of words particular to that rite, and the closest we might come to a word for this category of activities as a whole—τὰ ἱερά or ἡ ὁσία, holy things—was applied very widely and included more than rituals (holy offerings, holy words, holy temples, holy places, holy rites, etc.). As a result, the modern scholarship on specifically ritual ἱερά and ὁσία in ancient Greece can typically be divided into broad and narrow strategies, much like the scholarship on ritual more generally. Some authors consider ancient Greek ritual broadly as a subset of Greek religion;²⁰ some focus narrowly on the details of individual rites.²¹ Neither strategy focuses on examining ritual as a category in its own right. In the atypical study that does do this, it is clear that there are great challenges involved in outlining a definition that can account for all possible rituals.²²

In light of these methodological difficulties, I suggest that a formal, strict definition of ritual—one that covers all fifth-century ritual activity without any possible counterexample—is unnecessary for my purposes. Indeed, the search for this elusive perfect definition is a distraction. Rather than attempting to offer a complete list of the conditions sufficient to count an activity as a ritual, I will suggest a list of the most important necessary conditions. These conditions address both the question of how an ancient audience would have recognized an action as ritual in the plays they attended and the question of the poetic characteristics of these rituals that account for ritual’s ability to generate expectations and affect the audience’s experience of the play. Before moving on to these necessary conditions, however, it will be useful to list the ritual activities occurring in the plays of Sophocles that these criteria are meant to describe.

In her consideration of the rituals in extant Greek tragedies, Zeitlin identifies eight categories of ritual action: (1) rituals of purification and expiation; (2) suppliant ritual; (3) apotropaic or propitiatory ritual in time of crisis; (4) rituals of celebration (homecoming, triumph, joy); (5) mantic ritual; (6) rites of passage

(birth, marriage, death, and tendance of the dead); (7) oaths and curses; (8) festivals and congregations (seasonal and agrarian, worship of a god, mystery initiations) and special cult worship of a god or hero (Dionysus, Apollo, and others).²³ Of this larger group, the following are prominently referenced in the plots of Sophocles' plays and are considered in detail in this book: funeral rites, marriage, sacrifice, supplication, oath, purification, cult initiation, and prophecy.²⁴ These actions can certainly be counted as rituals, even though they do not exhaust the category. I will return to these specific rituals and the normative features of their performance in chapter 1. For now, it remains to describe in broader terms what made them recognizable as ritual, distinct from nonritual activities to the fifth-century audience, and what poetic characteristics they share. For the most part, the qualities I describe apply equally to the rituals occurring in all three Attic tragedians and, more broadly, to the rituals performed in historical fifth-century Athens. In determining these criteria, however, I consider only the rituals in the Sophoclean corpus.

Most basically, rituals are actions undertaken by human agents that can be distinguished from nonritual activities because they invite the involvement of the gods in some capacity, either implicitly or explicitly.²⁵ In Sophocles, the gods do not undertake ritual actions themselves,²⁶ but they are always implicated in them. Ritual activities expect the gods to fulfill some request, seek to negotiate the relationship between the mortal and the divine (often specifically by invoking a god in his or her area of patronage), or anticipate the gods' intervention in the event that a ritual obligation is not upheld. For my purposes, this divine involvement is the *sine qua non* distinguishing rituals from other kinds of action in Sophocles. It was also likely the most noticeable feature of ritual and the one that permitted the ancient audience to make this distinction, a distinction that remains valid even if they lacked a lexical item to describe the conceptual category of ritual.

Before moving on to the poetic characteristics of the rituals that occur in Sophocles, it is important to stress that the implications of ritual are not exclusively concerned with the actions and disposition of the gods. Since human characters undertake all the rituals performed in Sophocles' plays, all rituals have repercussions in the human realm, facilitating the formation, dissolution, affirmation, weakening, or simply the modification of human relationships. While such human repercussions are not sufficient to designate an activity as ritual—obviously many events in the plays affect human relationships without having a ritual component—the human consequences of ritual are a necessary corollary to the divine aspects of ritual activity. In Sophocles, the gods seldom intervene directly onstage.²⁷ Thus, while the divine implications of ritual are important in Sophoclean narrative, particularly to mark certain actions as ritual, the human repercussions of ritual feature much more prominently onstage as the plot unfolds. This is true whether the ritual itself

also takes place onstage or is performed offstage and merely described. It is also true whether the ritual ultimately succeeds or fails in its purpose.

It is when we consider this impact of ritual activity on human relationships that three interconnected poetic qualities of ritual emerge. These shared characteristics are not unique to ritual activity, and they certainly cannot form the basis of an exclusive definition of ritual. Nonetheless, they are necessary conditions if an activity is to be counted as ritual. Moreover, they are absolutely integral to ritual's ability to affect the theater spectators' dramatic experience and elicit expectations about the likely progression of the drama. The first poetic quality is that all rituals entail a predictable progression, Jauss's *Erwartungshorizont*, or threshold of expectation.²⁸ Once spectators have seen the beginning of a ritual, within broad parameters they will be able to anticipate certain actions or words in a certain order with a certain result, provided the ritual is performed correctly. The second poetic characteristic of ritual is that this predictable progression entails either an affirmation of existing status or, more commonly, a change of status for those implicated in the ritual. What this change of status entails is explained in greater detail by the third poetic quality: the change of status effected by ritual activity is typically expressed through membership in a community. This notion of community is defined in the loosest possible sense—for example, a partnership, a family, the ritually pure, the favored of a certain god, or the ranks of the dead. Ritual, in other words, has the capacity to facilitate the movement of individuals from one group to another.

In sum, whenever a ritual is performed in the context of a Sophoclean play, a human is the agent and his actions implicate the gods in some way. In addition, the ritual always has implications within the human community. It communicates the status of the ritual participant, indicating the community to which a given character belongs or from which that character is excluded. It suggests a predictable sequence of ritual steps that will take place if the ritual unfolds correctly. Finally, on this basis it gives the audience cues that allow them to anticipate future changes in status and community membership for the ritual participant. There are certainly nonritual features of Sophoclean dramatic narrative, like the tragic *agon*, that share some of these characteristics.²⁹ In such cases, however, the implication of the gods distinguishes narrative in general from ritual in particular.

Sophoclean Rituals and Ritual Theory

In order to talk about the three poetic features of ritual more efficiently and precisely, I appeal to two scholars of the modern era who provide not strict theories of ritual but rather flexible frameworks that facilitate discussion of it. The first theorist is Arnold van Gennep. His hypothesis, originally published in

1909, is that all rituals can be described by a tripartite progression that he calls the rite of passage. This progression entails three key steps: a preliminary phase, separating the ritual participant from the group to which he previously belonged; a liminal phase, during which the participant undergoes some kind of transition; and a postliminal phase, during which the ritual participant is either reintegrated into the same group as before but with a new status or integrated into a new group entirely.³⁰ Van Gennep's basic premise is that human life involves frequent transitions and that an individual's place in society is seldom static for long. The various steps of the rite of passage minimize the possible harmful effects of these transitions for both the individual and the group.³¹

While van Gennep's model has been broadly applied and strongly defended in Classical scholarship,³² there has been some resistance to this model, as expressed, for example, in H. S. Versnel's *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion* (1994) and in Mark Padilla's collected volume *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece: Literature, Religion, Society* (1999). In his contribution to the collection, David Leitaos suggests that van Gennep's model has led Classicists to focus too intensely on the liminal phase of ritual transitions; he proposes that much of what is currently categorized as liminal should be considered under the rubric of preliminary or postliminal rites, reflecting the qualities of the group the initiate is leaving or joining rather than a transitional status.³³ Claude Calame, by contrast, expanding on difficulties noted by Versnel among others, criticizes the reductionist and overly simplistic character of van Gennep's theory and the even further reduction and oversimplification to which van Gennep's work has itself been subject in reception. The result, he suggests, is a methodological error: a simplistic rite-of-passage model is force-fitted onto any society at all and then forms the basis of a totalizing account of that society that fails to consider what is unique and distinctive.³⁴

Although I am sympathetic to these concerns, particularly those of Calame, I maintain that my application of van Gennep's theory to Sophocles does not distort or oversimplify the plays. My argument does not use van Gennep to draw conclusions about historical rituals or about Greek society more broadly; rather, I use it to account for the portrayal of highly stylized rituals within a highly stylized genre. Like ritual, ancient tragedy was governed by broadly applicable conventions that permitted a great deal of individual variation. The flexibility of the rite-of-passage model is a strength in this context rather than a weakness.

The work of Victor Turner, who acknowledges van Gennep's influence and in many ways should be seen as his successor,³⁵ is also valuable for understanding how Sophoclean rituals function. Turner's work focuses on the liminal phase that van Gennep identifies and, instead of conceiving of ritual as a tripartite progression, proposes that society has two natural states of being: alternating periods of

structure and *communitas*, with the latter corresponding to the liminal phase of ritual action. According to Turner,

The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less.” The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. . . . From all this I infer that, for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality.³⁶

In Turner’s assessment, the legitimacy of positions that are held during the structure phase is acquired during the *communitas* phase. A member of any society depends on both phases to acquire and maintain his social position, and that member will continuously and actively seek the phase he does not currently occupy in order to do so.³⁷

In his later work Turner expanded his theory to include the concept he called the “social drama,” offering a clearer account of the forces that provoke the shifts between structure and *communitas* and focusing less exclusively on the liminal phase. The first step in the social drama involves a “breach” of one of the rules governing the peaceful social existence of the society in question. This then escalates to a “crisis” and the society’s inability to maintain the status quo. The third step, which corresponds to Turner’s *communitas*, is “redress,” involving ritualized action in the form of a religious, legal, or military response. Finally, the fourth step, “reconciliation,” brings the society back into peaceful relations with itself, which may involve reintegrating the conflicting parties into the same group or recognizing an irremediable breach and separation into two independent and isolated groups.³⁸ It is easy to see how these four steps map onto van Gennep’s rite of passage—preliminary (breach and crisis), liminal (redress), and postliminal (reconciliation)—and represent only minor modifications to the original theory.

Taken together, van Gennep’s and Turner’s models account for the chief qualities that define the rituals occurring in Sophocles, once they are recognized as rituals in the first place by virtue of their invocation of the gods: a predictable progression leading to a change of status that is typically reflected through membership in a defined community. The rite of passage follows a predictable course from preliminary to liminal to postliminal, as does Turner’s social drama, moving from

breach to crisis to redress to reconciliation. While Turner's bipartite distinction between structure and *communitas* lacks a sense of narrative progression, it still offers the predictable alternation of the two, which is itself a kind of progression. Both theorists also account for the changes of status that pertain to an individual's place within a larger group. Van Gennep's rite of passage explicitly advertises itself as explaining how individuals undergo transitions of status within their community; Turner approaches the same question from the perspective of the community rather than the individual. In a healthy community, each individual occupies an appropriate and ritually determined position, or else there will be further breach and crisis.

Van Gennep and Turner in Application: Euripides and Aeschylus

Brief examples from non-Sophoclean plays illustrate the utility of these theories for discussing the ritual content of Greek tragedy. Since, as I discuss in detail in chapter 1, the rituals that occur in Sophocles habitually stray from the patterns defined by van Gennep and Turner—though the ability to perceive this as a deviation certainly relies on the existence of the model in the first place—I appeal here to Aeschylus and Euripides for examples of rituals that, for the most part, “follow the rules.” They allow me to demonstrate the essential characteristics of tragic rituals and show how van Gennep's and Turner's ritual frameworks offer a useful way of discussing them.

I turn first to Euripides' *Hippolytus*, applying Turner's bipartite model of alternating structure and *communitas* to analyze Hippolytus' oath to the nurse that he will not reveal Phaedra's illicit love for him.³⁹ The audience does not witness the oath, and so the predictable progression of the ritual is not emphasized. However, the nurse makes it clear that the ritual has taken place offstage (611), and the way in which the ritual has altered the relationship between Hippolytus and the nurse is abundantly clear. Even though Hippolytus is the son of a great hero and the nurse a lowly slave, the *communitas* shared during the exchange of the oath temporarily puts them on the same level, allowing the nurse to exact an obligation from the prince that he must uphold even when they return to structure and Hippolytus is once more her social superior.

It is also important to note that Hippolytus is held to his obligation specifically by the threat of punishment from the gods. He tells the nurse, “Know well that my piety saves you, woman; for if I had not been taken unaware by an oath sworn in the name of the gods, I would not hold myself back from telling my father about this” (εὖ δ' ἴσθι, τοῦμόν σ' εὐσεβὲς σφάζει, γύναι / εἰ μὴ γὰρ ὄρκους θεῶν

ἄφαρκτος ἤρεθην, / οὐκ ἄν ποτ' ἔσχον μὴ οὐ τάδ' ἐξειπεῖν πατρί, 656–58). The prospect of divine retribution is what confirms for the audience that a ritual has indeed taken place offstage, and this, consequently, encourages the audience to develop certain expectations about how Hippolytus must act as the play unfolds. Even when Theseus accuses him of raping Phaedra, as she falsely alleges in her suicide note (943–46), and threatens him with death, Hippolytus does not reveal what he has sworn to keep secret. Upon his return to structure, he abides by the ritual obligation he undertook in a state of *communitas*. On the basis of the normal rules of ritual engagement, the audience will expect no less of him.

In this play, ritual *communitas* establishes a conspiratorial community between two characters who otherwise would not share this mutual interest in Phaedra's reputation. Even though the reference to this state of *communitas* is fleeting and refers to a ritual that occurs offstage, it still gives the audience a means of anticipating the way Hippolytus will act as the plot progresses. While his infamous comment that “my tongue has sworn but my mind remains unsworn” (ἡ γλῶσσ' ὁμώμοχ', ἡ δὲ φρήν ἀνώμοτος, 612) is sometimes taken as reason to doubt the sincerity of his oath, a perspective informed by ritual speaks against this interpretation.⁴⁰ By the end of the play, it is clear in retrospect that the correct interpretation of this line is that Hippolytus will respect his oath only so far as his tongue is concerned; that is, he refuses to reveal Phaedra's secret to Theseus, even though he inwardly bristles at the constraints imposed by the oath. For any portion of the audience relying primarily on ritual to guide their expectations, Hippolytus' actions following his oath to the nurse correspond exactly with what ritual orthodoxy demands. For those momentarily persuaded by Hippolytus' misogynistic bluster and the implication that he intends to break his oath, his staunch refusal to reveal the truth under pressure may initially come as a surprise; nonetheless, it confirms the ritual reading in retrospect.

As this example from the *Hippolytus* reveals, Turner's paradigm of alternating structure and *communitas* is helpful for elucidating questions of status as defined by community belonging. The ritual oath in Euripides' play speaks to the altered relationship of obligation between Hippolytus and the nurse. In dramatic units of larger scope, particularly in plays whose plots revolve around a single ritual action, van Gennep's rite of passage and Turner's social drama offer the best framework for analyzing the sense of progression that ritual communicates. The structure of Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, for example, a play about the fate of fifty sisters betrothed against their will to their fifty Egyptian cousins, is based on suppliant ritual.⁴¹ In the preliminary phase of the supplication (Turner's breach and crisis), the Danaids are told that they must marry their cousins, and, to avoid this fate, they flee Egypt to supplicate Pelasgus, ruler of Argos. This initial action, analyzed as the first step

in a ritual progression, creates clear expectations. Pelasgus, as *supplicandus*, will have to decide whether to accept the suppliants into Argos. The ritual nature of this plot element is made totally clear in the play's first words, which immediately invoke Zeus, protector of suppliants (Ζεὺς . . . ὑφικτωρ, 1) and affirm the role of the divine in the supplication that ensues.

As the Danaids wait to hear whether they will continue to be Egyptian or will be granted status as Argives, their indeterminate status corresponds to Turner's redress and van Gennep's liminal phase. While the Argive assembly debates their future offstage, the Danaids remain poised between Egypt and Argos, but the ritual framework provided by the supplication allows the audience to expect with confidence that the play's resolution will entail a decision one way or the other. Ultimately, the Argive assembly votes unanimously to accept the suppliance of the Danaids (605–24). This indicates the end of the liminal phase of the ritual supplication, and the play now moves into the final postliminal (van Gennep) or reconciliation (Turner) phase. If the predictable ritual progression plays out, the audience can expect some confirmation of the Danaids' new status as an expression of their belonging in the Argive community. This is indeed what happens when Pelasgus decisively dismisses the Egyptian herald's arrogant demand that the Danaids be returned to their fatherland (942–49). Although the play ends in uncertainty as Argos braces for an imminent Egyptian attack, the completion of the full ritual progression and the confirmation of the change of status it has effected for the Danaids confers a sense of closure on the play's final scene and sets the stage for the remaining two plays of Aeschylus' trilogy, in which the Danaids will be treated as Argives rather than Egyptians by both the community of Argos and the audience.

Ritual Structure, Narrative Structure: Aristotle's *Poetics*

This brief consideration of rituals in the plays of Euripides and Aeschylus reveals the relevance of van Gennep's and Turner's ritual models in a dramatic context. In the foregoing examples of rituals ultimately performed completely and correctly, the models explain how rituals embedded in a tragic narrative both reveal and affect the status of the characters and allow the audience to anticipate the further progression of the plot. These examples of ritual, identified as such by their implication of the gods, highlight the poetic qualities of ritual that I have already outlined: namely, a predictable progression resulting in a change of status defined via community membership. Having approached the question of ritual and tragedy through ritual theory, I will now demonstrate that the relationship

between the two is equally strong when approached from the other direction. Aristotle's theory of tragedy reveals that the defining qualities of Greek tragedy, particularly those qualities that characterize the plot, are precisely the ones that both van Gennepe and Turner would later elucidate for ritual. Like these ritual theorists, Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, discusses predictable progression, change of status, and (less overtly) community membership. Our best representative of ancient views on Greek tragedy strengthens my claim that there exists a close analogy between ritual and dramatic narrative.

Some might object to my use of Aristotle's *Poetics* to explain the conventions of fifth-century Greek tragedy. There are many difficulties in using Aristotle as a source, particularly the fact that the *Poetics* is almost certainly neither complete nor polished.⁴² Nevertheless, there are several good reasons to trust Aristotle insofar as I make use of the *Poetics* here. First, although Aristotle was writing decades after the original performances of the plays of Sophocles and the other tragedians, he remains the first and oldest theorist of Greek tragedy to whom we have access,⁴³ and surely had a less distorted view of these plays than we do if only by virtue of the state of the evidence. Moreover, with respect to the potentially unfinished nature of Aristotle's work, my primary interest is in what Aristotle has to say about *mythos*, and, as Stephen Halliwell shows,⁴⁴ Aristotle is comparatively consistent and sophisticated in his discussion of *mythos* as compared with the other topics he discusses in the *Poetics*. Finally, while a frequent complaint about the *Poetics* is that Aristotle pays too little attention to the visual and performed elements of tragedy, these elements are not particularly important for the analysis I attempt here. My argument, like the *Poetics* itself, is primarily concerned with the effects that tragedy (and its ritual content) produces in its audience, regardless of whether it is performed in full or merely read aloud.⁴⁵ For these reasons I take Aristotle to be a reliable guide to the broadly conceived generic conventions that governed dramatic narrative in fifth-century Athens.

Of the six component parts of tragedy that Aristotle identifies in the *Poetics* (plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song, 1450a7–10), *mythos* or plot is both the most important and discussed in the most detail as the soul of tragedy (1450a38–39). What defines *mythos* most basically is that it is teleological; that is, the most important function of tragedy is to aim at the *telos* defined by the *mythos* (1450a16–19). "Plots," in the Aristotelian sense, "are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving."⁴⁶ It is quite clear that a sense of predictable (or appropriate) progression is at the heart of how Aristotle thinks tragedy operates.

A closer consideration of Aristotle's explanation of the ideal tragedy aligns with what van Gennepe and Turner have to say about ritual and the way it brings

about changes of status. For Aristotle, the best tragic plots are complex, which means that they should entail both *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* (introduced as part of a complex plot at 1452a12–21, defined respectively at 1452a22–29 and 1452a29–1452b8, 1454b19–1455a21). It is at these moments of heightened experience that tragic characters undergo and become aware that they have undergone a significant reversal of fortune. In essence, Aristotle's analysis conceives of tragedy as the experience of a character who undergoes a period of crisis and transition. The period of crisis corresponds to Turner's *communitas*. The periods before and after this crisis, periods in which the character's status is fixed rather than changing, correspond to Turner's *structure*. The transition from stability to crisis and back that Aristotle's model entails evokes the rhythmical alternation between Turner's two societal states and echoes van Gennep's assertion that the purpose of ritual is to facilitate changes of status.

The analogy between ritual and tragedy is strengthened when Aristotle's more detailed account of how plots progress is compared with the progression of the rite of passage or social drama. Aristotle starts, with deceptive simplicity, by defining a complete plot as having a beginning, a middle, and an end (1450b26–34). We must wait until later in the *Poetics* for Aristotle to elaborate on this. He explains that every tragedy starts with *desis* or complication (1455b24–29), which is defined as everything that precedes the moment of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. Every tragedy ends with *lusis* or *dénouement* (1455b24–29), defined as everything that follows from this moment of crisis and transition. This tripartite structure maps onto van Gennep's rite of passage and Turner's homage to van Gennep, the social drama.⁴⁷ The preliminary phase of van Gennep's model, as well as Turner's breach and crisis, are both consistent with Aristotle's *desis*. Similarly, the postliminal phase of a rite of passage and the reconciliation that brings Turner's social drama to a close map onto Aristotle's *lusis*. *Peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* remain the central transitional phase, corresponding to van Gennep's liminal phase and Turner's redress. To oversimplify, therefore, but with provocative implications, van Gennep, Turner, and Aristotle, taken together, suggest that ritual and tragic narrative both accomplish changes of status via analogous progressions.

Ritual Poetics

It is clear that ritual and dramatic narrative share many qualities. These are qualities that find expression in van Gennep's and Turner's ritual frameworks and, likewise, in Aristotle's dramatic theory. In order to move from this observation of similarity to an explanation of how the analogy between ritual and narrative supports ritual's function as a literary device, we require a unifying theory,

one that binds these separate approaches into a single methodology. Here, finally, we arrive at ritual poetics.

Langdon Elsbree's work on ritual as a poetic device in the British and American novel offers a model for how ritual and literary theory can be combined in this way. The link he discerns is a psychological one. Elsbree draws on the work of the psychologist Eugene d'Aquili on the cognitive imperative, the innate human tendency, inscribed into the structure of the brain, to try to order what is perceived and experienced into a systematic, cognitive whole.⁴⁸ This imperative to organize accounts for the way humans use both ritual and narrative to impose structure in their lives, allowing people to better anticipate and understand change. According to Elsbree, the cognitive imperative accounts specifically for the correspondence between van Gennep's rite of passage and the narrative structure of the novel.⁴⁹ Elsbree argues that the reader of a novel and the participant in a ritual experience the same instinct to impose narrative logic on what they are witnessing; in both cases the experience is understood as a kind of story in which one event leads logically and predictably to the next. Rituals that are embedded in narratives, therefore, because they are subject to the same cognitive imperative as the narrative itself, influence the logic the reader will attempt to impose on the story.⁵⁰

It is a short distance from the novel to other forms of narrative literature, as the more recent work of Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos on Greek literature has shown.⁵¹ The essential idea behind their approach to Greek literature begins with the notion of poetics as defined by Tzvetan Todorov, among others. A theory of poetics seeks to arrive not at individual interpretations of texts but rather at a set of general laws that constitute a theory of the structure and functioning of the literary discourse of texts.⁵² In their study, Yatromanolakis and Roilos arrive at such laws by considering the characteristics typical of Greek ritual that correspond to characteristics typical of Greek literature.⁵³ With these guidelines in place, they show that both ritual and poetry have a basic structure and that any alteration of that structure serves both aesthetic and communicative purposes.⁵⁴ A ritual embedded in a literary context will create one set of poetic expectations; changes to that ritual will alter those expectations. Yatromanolakis and Roilos apply this theory to the literary analysis of a huge range of works from Sappho to Seferis, drawing out the implications of the ritual content for literary interpretation. Although they do not consider the application of ritual poetics to Sophocles in the original 2003 statement of their theory, the companion volume, *Greek Ritual Poetics*, contains essays by several eminent Classical scholars illustrating the useful application of ritual poetics to Greek tragedy. This includes Henrichs' discussion of ritual perversion in Sophocles.⁵⁵

Yatromanolakis and Roilos offer a compelling model for the combined application of ritual theory and literary theory to rituals that occur in literary contexts. Their model of ritual poetics explains and supports the use of ritual vocabulary to describe narrative phenomena and, conversely, the use of literary vocabulary to describe ritual phenomena. The application of two sets of loosely conceived laws ultimately offers a richer language and a more complex theoretical framework within which to discuss literature with ritual content; this allows for a more accurate understanding of what the audience for that literature is likely to perceive and anticipate. In the performed genre of tragedy specifically, this approach yields a more nuanced and better-supported interpretation of the spectators' likely reaction to what transpires on the stage than can be achieved by either theory alone.

Following Yatromanolakis and Roilos, "ritual poetics" is the unifying term I use to evoke the analogy between ritual and narrative and the way in which a ritual action embedded in a narrative context influences both the audience's understanding of plot and character and their narrative expectations. More specifically, the concept of ritual poetics, as I use it here, draws on the qualities that ritual and narrative share, as outlined above in the terms proposed by van Gennep, Turner, and Aristotle. These qualities include the three poetic characteristics of Sophoclean rituals: namely, predictable progression and a change of status, usually expressed as a function of community membership. Taken together, these concepts provide the foundation for my arguments about the use of ritual in the Sophoclean corpus.

My examination of Sophocles' use of ritual proceeds in five large steps. In chapter 1, I expand on these introductory remarks, discussing the way in which ritual and narrative are analogous in Sophocles' plays. I begin by establishing a foundation of what can be considered "normal" ritual. I then explain that rituals in Sophocles are seldom performed correctly or in full according to these broadly conceived guidelines. The way in which such rituals deviate from the expected influences the audience's perception of plot and character. In other words, mistakes in the ritual process suggest corresponding deviations on the level of the narrative. I identify the three most common ritual mistakes that occur in the seven complete plays of Sophocles: problems of ritual conflation, ritual repetition, and ritual status. Using examples from the *Antigone*, the *Trachiniae*, and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, I explain what I mean by each of these categories and offer some isolated examples of their use.

In the next three chapters, I consider each category of ritual mistake in greater detail, offering a comprehensive reading of three plays to illustrate the application of ritual poetics in Sophocles. Chapter 2 considers ritual conflation in the *Ajax*. In

some scenes in this play, the confusion of two distinct rituals or ritual roles contributes to the ambivalent characterization of Ajax himself and helps to define more clearly his problematic relationship to the Greek army, his friends, and his family. In other scenes, the conflation of rituals performed at two different points in the narrative belies the apparent trajectory of the dramatic action. Chapter 3 examines ritual repetition in the *Electra*, a play in which the normal repetition of ritual becomes excessive. In this play, mistakes and corruptions in the rituals surrounding death necessitate further rituals, rendering the sequence of ritual and dramatic action potentially infinite. Chapter 4 looks at problems of ritual status in the *Philoctetes* and the cognitive dissonance that members of the audience experience between the ritual expectation that the rituals performed by Neoptolemus and Philoctetes will fail and the dramatic expectation that they will succeed. Oaths in this play, for example, contribute to a strong dramatic sense that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are obligated to one another, even though Neoptolemus' youth and Philoctetes' status as exile make these oaths illegitimate by the normal ritual standards of the Greek society represented in the play.

In chapter 5 I examine the *Oedipus at Colonus* from a broader perspective, considering how this play incorporates all three of the ritual problems that I have identified. Through the overarching organizing principle of the supplication motif, introduced by Oedipus' supplication of the Eumenides in the prologue, I examine how all three kinds of ritual mistakes together guide the audience to the play's extraordinary ritual finale. Here the parallels between ritual and narrative are particularly close because the progression of Oedipus' supplication gives structure to the story, as his status is gradually altered to facilitate his acceptance among the community of Eumenides at the end of the play.

A brief conclusion explores the implications of this new way of looking at the ritual content of Sophocles' plays. More than simply revealing how ritual works in Sophocles, an approach guided by ritual poetics also offers insight into his dramatic technique more broadly. In particular, ritual poetics sheds light on the endings of the plays. The conclusions of these dramas are notoriously ambiguous and difficult to explain. In some cases the question of how to interpret the ending, or even to say whether the play ends on an optimistic or pessimistic note, has generated volumes of scholarship without generating consensus. Ritual poetics offers a concrete way of approaching the problem of closure in a corpus of plays that all implicate ritual in the way in which they conclude. I suggest that ritual, even as it influences an audience's perception of what happens within the play, also allows them to anticipate what will happen beyond its conclusion and in this way contributes to a lack of closure in all the plays.

1

Normative Rituals and Ritual Mistakes in the *Antigone*, *Trachiniae*, and *Oedipus Tyrannus*

ἅπαν τὸ χρημ' ἤμαρτε χρηστὰ μωμένῃ.

[She has erred in everything, though she sought the best.]

Trach. 1136

In the introduction I discuss the close affinity between ritual and dramatic narrative. Both progress according to predictable principles, and both implicate those involved in them (as either ritual participants or tragic characters) in a change of status that is typically expressed through membership in a community. According to a theory of ritual poetics, any correspondences between rituals and the dramas in which they are embedded contribute implicitly to the audience's perception of the characters and ability to anticipate developments in the plot. In this chapter I explore in greater detail how the analogy between ritual and narrative in Sophoclean tragedy influences the audience's dramatic experience and expectations. Since, in Sophocles, it is primarily ritual mistakes that serve in this poetic capacity, I begin by considering briefly what constitutes correct ritual activity for my purposes in order to establish a baseline against which incorrect rituals can be identified.

Normative Ritual

My interpretive framework for establishing what is to be considered “normal” ritual activity in Sophocles' plays is defined primarily by the ritual competence of the typical fifth-century Athenian theatergoer, to the extent that this competence can be determined. The composition of the theater audience in

the fifth century has been a topic of much debate, a debate that is unlikely to yield certain answers on the basis of the existing evidence.¹ That being said, the exact composition of the audience in the Theater of Dionysus is ultimately not important for the purposes of the argument I make here. By choosing the plays of Sophocles as my object of investigation, I effectively limit my frame of reference to Athens in the second half of the fifth century. This permits a relatively secure reconstruction of aspects of the social and historical reality of the theater audience as a collective, setting aside individual differences of, for example, gender, age, and economic status. By consulting the evidence for both historical ritual performances and the presentation of rituals in artistic contexts, it is possible to understand in broad terms the ritual expectations of Sophocles' audience.

For the reconstruction of fifth-century ritual knowledge, the cautious and exacting scholarship of Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood provides an excellent model.² In her contribution to Yatromanolakis and Roilos' collected volume on Greek ritual poetics, she argues that it is possible to reconstruct the fifth-century audience's "perceptual filters" for tragic rituals by looking to other, nontragic sources of evidence. Epigraphy, oratory, the historians, vase images, epic, and many other sources confirm that the rituals displayed in Greek tragedy correspond reasonably closely—certainly closely enough for the broad analysis I attempt here—to the rituals actually practiced in the fifth century and to the literary and artistic representations of ritual found in other fifth-century venues. Sourvinou-Inwood also reminds us that tragic representations of ritual themselves contributed to what an audience would expect of ritual action in the ancient theater, offering scholars another means of gauging audience perceptions. For example, the supplication rituals in earlier plays (Aeschylus' *Suppliants* or Euripides' *Heracleidae* and *Suppliant Women*) would have shaped audience expectations about the supplication rituals in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Rituals in artistic contexts are often modified by the artist in some way to suit an artistic goal and therefore cannot be used uncritically by modern scholars to reconstruct historical realities. On the other hand, these rituals are seldom invented at random; even artistic rituals must be based in reality or else prove incomprehensible to their audience.³ It is these essential features of the rituals that appear in Sophocles that I appeal to in my argument. I am interested in the basic characteristics and vocabulary that would have allowed an ancient audience to identify a ritual as itself and not some other ritual and the basic steps through which that ritual typically progressed. The finer details of the historical ritual behind the tragic version are, for the most part, unimportant. Ritual supplication offers a simplified example.⁴ For a supplication to be recognized as such requires that a suppliant make a formal request of a *supplicandus* and that the *supplicandus* offer a reply. If

the *supplicandus* were to ask the suppliant for a favor, this would violate the normal rules governing the ritual transaction. If the *supplicandus* were to offer no response, the ritual would be incomplete. Details such as whether the suppliant approached the *supplicandus* by touching his chin or his knees are irrelevant for the kind of analysis that I perform here. An audience might expect both or neither, and while the presence of either would strengthen the audience's ability to identify the ritual as a supplication, the absence of these gestures would not undermine that identification or alter the audience's expectations about the general progression of the ritual. I proceed on the assumption that it is possible to understand on a basic level what a fifth-century audience would expect of a ritual element in a play—that is, their ritual “perceptual filters.”

As discussed in the introduction, the rituals I consider in the plays of Sophocles include funeral rites, marriage, sacrifice, supplication, oath, purification, cult initiation, and prophecy. These may be performed onstage or performed offstage and merely described; they may be correct and efficacious or problematic and ineffectual; they may be actual rituals or ritualized actions—not rituals in a technical sense but actions described in a way that evokes ritual. However a ritual appears in Sophocles, it appeals to an audience's essential knowledge of that ritual. Here I offer a brief overview of the way in which each ritual typically progresses and the most important lexical items that would have allowed an ancient audience to identify these rituals as they are referred to in Sophocles. This provides a standard against which mistakes and deviations from the norm can be identified.

Funerary Ritual

Of all the rituals that occur or are referenced in the Sophoclean corpus, funerary rites are the most common, and I will therefore consider them in somewhat greater detail than the others. In normal circumstances, a death in the Greek world created the need for several ritual actions, one leading organically to the next, from the death itself to the funeral rites that tended to the body appropriately to the grave-side offerings that occurred once the body was properly settled in its final resting place. These three broad phases correspond to van Gennep's preliminary (separation), liminal (transformation), and postliminal (reintegration) steps in the rite of passage. The rituals addressed the liminal state of both the deceased and the mourner brought on by the death, integrating the former into the community of the dead and the latter back into the society of the living after a period of withdrawal. Under normal circumstances, the resolution of this dual liminality signaled the successful completion of the funeral ritual and, in Turner's terminology, the return from *communitas* to *structure*.

The occurrence of a death and the need to help the deceased reach the underworld brought the mourners into close proximity with chthonic deities whom the living would normally keep at a distance and even avoid mentioning by name. A detailed set of prescribed ritual actions helped to negotiate this potentially dangerous communication with the infernal powers. A death in the Greek world was typically followed by a period of *prothesis*, laying out the body (κεῖμαι, προκεῖμαι, προτίθημι), in the house of the deceased.⁵ This is the equivalent of van Gennep's first phase, allowing the family members to withdraw from society just as deceased individuals withdrew in their death. During this phase, the body was prepared for the funeral by the women of the household, usually the next of kin. The eyes and mouth were closed and the body washed, anointed with oil, dressed in a white robe or shroud, and then laid out on a bier. The corpse might be adorned with crowns, branches, jewelry, ribbons, or flowers. It was at this point that the women participating in the *prothesis* began the formal lament, with wailing, tearing of hair, beating of breasts, and sometimes touching or embracing the corpse.⁶ Following the period of *prothesis*, the body was conveyed with lamentations to the site of the grave in a formal procession called the *ekphora* (ἐκφέρειν). This literal journey from house to gravesite offers a metaphor for the transformation of the second phase of van Gennep's rite of passage as the deceased made a metaphorical journey from the human sphere to the world of the dead. Following the *ekphora*, various rites were conducted at the gravesite to accompany the act of burial. This usually included libations and food offerings; in rare cases a ritual slaughter might be performed at the tomb (τάφος, τύμβος). Once these rites were accomplished, the deceased was considered to be integrated into the world of the dead, and the mourners could reintegrate into society. The period of strict mourning came to an end, and with the departure of the corpse, the house could be cleansed of pollution and everyday activities resumed.⁷ This final return to daily life, with the deceased securely settled among the other shades, corresponds to the third phrase in van Gennep's tripartite progression.

Throughout all stages of the actual funeral, lament (πένθος, πενθέω, θρήνος, θρηνέω, κλαίω, στένω, στέναχω, δάκρυον, δακρύω) served as the tangible sign of the ritual liminality of both the deceased and the family members conducting the funerary rites. Unlike the other rituals I consider in this book, ritual lament has no clearly defined progression, and no beginning, middle, and end. Rather, it takes its parameters from the rituals that it accompanies: the *prothesis*, *ekphora*, and graveside ceremony. Lament is purely liminal, an outward sign of the withdrawal of those involved in the funeral from Turner's structure into *communitas* to perform the transformative rites that facilitated the journey to the underworld. Under

normal circumstances the conclusion of these associated rites also informed the mourner that the time for lament was over.

After the initial funeral rites were concluded and the period of lament was at an end, there were further rituals prescribed for the maintenance of the grave. It was customary for the family to visit the gravesite and make offerings with regularity but decreasing frequency. Typically the grave was visited on the third, ninth, and thirtieth days after the conclusion of the funeral, and beyond that point annual visits continued indefinitely. During these visits, it was customary to make offerings, which usually consisted of libations of milk, honey, wine or water, bloodless or blood sacrifices, locks of hair, flowers, garlands, and ribbons. Rarely, gifts of clothing, torches, and even musical instruments might be dedicated. The Greeks appear to have believed that such offerings could affect the qualitative experience of the deceased in the afterlife and that, in order for the deceased to accept these gifts, they had to be offered in the right spirit.⁸

Marriage

No actual marriages take place in the plays of Sophocles, but the marriage ritual is frequently evoked as a metaphor for death and, as a ritual, must be considered as closely related to funerary practice. Even outside a literary context, there were many overlapping elements in historical Greek marriage and funeral rituals, especially if the funeral was for a virgin of marriageable age. Both rituals included washing and anointing the body of the young woman, dressing her in a robe and crown (both of which occurred during the *prothesis*), and marking her ritual transition by means of a torch-lit journey to the husband's home or to the grave (approximating the *ekphora*).⁹ Both marriage and death were conceived of as a young woman's journey, real or metaphorical, from one home and one family to another,¹⁰ and the celebration of the bride's arrival in her new home, often accompanied by sacrifice and feasting, was parallel to the rituals that marked the deceased's arrival at the grave and the underworld. As death rituals did for the deceased, marriage ritual facilitated a three-part rite of passage, removing the bride from one community, accomplishing her transformation through a literal and figurative journey to her husband's home and her new social role, and celebrating her reintegration into the community as a woman, no longer a girl. The marriage ceremony appealed to Hera, bride of Zeus, as the patron goddess of this ritual transition. In the case of the death of young girls of marriageable age, Persephone, bride of Hades, served as a more appropriate model. Marriage is evoked by many different words in Sophocles, most commonly γάμος (ἄγαμος, γαμέω), νύμφη

(νυμφεῖος, νυμφεύω), λέκτρον (ἄλεκτρος), ὑμέναιος (ἄνυμέναιος), εὐνή, and θάλαμος.

Sacrifice

Sacrificial ritual is also quite common in Sophocles' plays, though more often ritualized or metaphorical than literal. Fred Naiden offers a lucid and comprehensive overview of the evidence for Greek animal sacrifice, with generous references to ancient sources. While his monograph provides rich detail about the possible variations in rules, officiants, participants, and settings in different sacrificial scenarios, he shows that the *sine qua non* for a Greek sacrifice—the basic progression that must be understood in order to assess an ancient audience's dramatic expectations—included three phases: (1) the approach and invocation of a god; (2) the articulation of a request accompanied by an offering; and finally (3) the god's response, which took into account the character of the petitioner as evaluated on the grounds of ritual propriety and moral rectitude.¹¹ Naiden also notes that sacrifice more broadly conceived typically included celebrations, often feasts, which followed the successful completion of the ritual. It is clear enough that the basic outline of ancient sacrifice—removal from day-to-day life, period of closer-than-normal interaction with the divine, and return to daily life with a potentially new status for the successful petitioner—corresponds closely to the three stages of van Gennepe's rite of passage. In Sophocles, sacrificial ritual of this nature is typically marked lexically by words related to θύω (ἐκθύω, θύμα, θυλή), which refer to a legitimate offering (usually animal) to one or more gods and its accompanying rites, or to σφάζω (σφαγή, σφάγιον, σφαγεύς, μηλοσφαγέω, αὐτοσφαγής, νεοσφαγής), which emphasizes the violent act of cutting the victim's throat.¹² Libations, liquid offerings usually indicated by σπένδω (σπονδή), χέω (χοή), λείβω, or λουτρὸν in Sophocles, echo the ritual progression of animal sacrifice but on a smaller, less elaborate scale.¹³

Supplication

Ritual supplication is sometimes a plot point in Sophocles' plays. Once again, Naiden provides an extensively researched study on the subject, reviewing the literary evidence, both Greek and Latin, for supplication in the ancient world. According to Naiden, supplication must be understood as having four basic steps: (1) the suppliant approaches an individual or a place; (2) the suppliant makes a distinctive gesture to indicate his intention of making a request; (3) the suppliant makes a verbal request; and (4) the *supplicandus* gives a response.¹⁴ In terms of van

Gennep's three-part ritual progression, steps 1 and 2 correspond to the preliminary rites and withdrawal from society, step 3 is the transformative liminal phase, and step 4 represents the postliminal action during which the ritual participants re-integrate into society, often with a new status as defined by their new relationship. Suppliants were under the protection of Zeus Hikesios, and those who violated the sacred sanctuary of suppliants or went back on their promise of aid could expect his swift retribution. Acts of supplication are marked lexically in Sophocles by several words: ἀντιάζω (ἄντομαι), προστροπή (προστρόπαιος), and especially ικέτης (ικνούμαι, ικτήριος, ικέσιος, ικετεύω).

Oaths and Other Verbal Rituals

According to Alan Sommerstein and Isabelle Torrance, who have compiled a database of known Greek oaths to 322 BCE, all oaths have three elements: (1) an assertory or promissory declaration; (2) explicit or implicit appeal to the gods as guarantors of the declaration; and (3) explicit or implicit evocation of a conditional curse, should the declaration prove untrue.¹⁵ Zeus, as Zeus Horkios, protects those who have received promises and threatens punishment to those who break them. Since taking an oath is a brief process and it is difficult to talk about a drawn-out progression in the sense that van Gennep's theory entails,¹⁶ Turner's framework best explains this particular ritual. Giving an oath is a withdrawal into *communitas*, where relationships, particularly relationships of obligation, become subject to change. When the speaker of the oath emerges back into structure, his status is different. His oath defines him as sharing a community with the person who exacted the promise and thus compels him to act in a way in which he was not compelled to act before completing the ritual. In Sophocles, oaths are most often designated by ὅμνυμι (ἀπόμνυμι, ὁμόω) or ὅρκος (ἔνορκος, ὄρκιος).

The category of verbal rituals also includes prayers and curses. Like oaths, prayers and curses entail a verbal invocation of the gods and the expectation that the gods will intervene in human affairs in the future. They are differentiated from oaths by virtue of involving a request rather than a promise and by the fact that they more explicitly depend on an existing relationship of reciprocity with the gods—for example, past sacrifices.¹⁷ As with oaths, prayers and curses are typically so short that it does not make sense to analyze them in terms of an extended progression; instead, a moment of *communitas*, in which speakers have closer than usual communication with the divine, is followed by a return to structure, in which speakers emerge having altered their relationship to the gods. While prayers and curses do occur in the plays of Sophocles and I refer to them on occasion, I do not explore these verbal rituals in great detail. In part, this is because they most

often accompany other rituals, rather than occurring in isolation, or they merely reinforce the effects of other rituals, rather than facilitating a new and unique ritual outcome. In Sophocles prayers are indicated by εὐχή (προσεύχομαι), λιτή, and κάτεγμα; curses are denoted by ἄράομαι (ἄρά, ἄραϊος, ἐπαράομαι); εὔχομαι and κατεύχομαι are used for both.

Purification

Purification ritual does not occur frequently in Sophocles but is still alluded to on occasion. While purification by blood was not uncommon in ancient Greece,¹⁸ in Sophocles references to purification typically involve the common ancient cathartic practice of cleansing with water.¹⁹ In one instance found in the *Ajax*, reference is made to purification in the sea, which was thought to have the greatest power to cleanse, particularly after the slaughter of animal victims.²⁰ It was also standard practice to perform purification rituals in unfrequented places, sometimes with the purpose of hiding or disposing of the source of pollution.²¹ Purification ritual involves the gods because the status it seeks to rectify, pollution, disrupts the healthy relationship between the human and the divine. A purification ritual, correctly performed, puts the purified individual back in good standing with the gods. Although there are many ways in which a purification might be performed (indeed, Sophocles preserves the most detailed and specific description of an ancient Greek purification ceremony of which we know at *OC* 466–92), the concept of purification more generally is evoked through the words καθαρός (συγκαθαρμόζω, δυσκάθαρτος) and ἀγνίζω. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where ritual purification is a crucial element in the story, reference is much more frequently made to the need to drive out pollution (μίασμα, μύσος, λῦμα).

Initiation and Mystery Cult

No literal cult initiation occurs in the Sophoclean corpus, but Sophocles alludes to aspects of mystery initiation. Indeed, allusions to the Eleusinian mysteries are integral to the description of Oedipus' death in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Cultic initiations are the example par excellence of van Gennep's rite-of-passage model. The initiate's withdrawal from normal society in preparation for initiation, the transformative rites undergone by the initiate with the guidance of a mystagogue, and the initiate's emergence as a new member of the cult under the protection of the cult's patron deities offer an archetypal example of the progression from pre-liminary to liminal to postliminal. Each mystery cult had its own unique set of

rituals and symbols and appealed to its own specific deities. I will not discuss these details here, but I will return to the Eleusinian mysteries specifically in my consideration of the *Oedipus at Colonus* in chapter 5.

Prophecy

Finally, Sophoclean tragedies frequently incorporate a prophecy in their plots. Although, historically, obtaining an oracle often implicated supplementary ritual actions—a sacrifice to Apollo, for example²²—these components of the larger ritual progression are not emphasized when prophecy is mentioned in tragedy, and I will not consider them in detail here. Rather, I focus on the process of obtaining information about the future in terms of a progression such as van Gennep or Turner might describe. As with the other rituals I have discussed, the process involved in obtaining an oracle can be understood as a predictable tripartite progression that influences the status of its participants. In the preliminary stage the petitioner withdraws from normal society in order to ask a question of the oracular god; in the liminal stage the petitioner receives the god's words; and in the postliminal stage the petitioner must interpret and react to the oracle that has been given, bringing about or simply undergoing the change of status that the prediction entails. Although an ancient audience will not, of course, have applied this modern terminology to tragic prophecies, my contention is that the tripartite progression of question, answer, and fulfillment is exactly what such an audience would anticipate in tragic situations involving an oracle. In other words, an audience would have recognized the process of obtaining a prophecy as belonging to the same category and possessing characteristics parallel to those of other rituals like sacrifice or supplication, particularly in light of the fact that it explicitly seeks the involvement of a god. In addition to references to famous sites of prophecy (Delphi, Dodona), words like μάντις (μαντεία) and θεσπίζω indicate prophetic ritual in the plays of Sophocles.

Ritual Mistakes

It is true of Greek tragedy in general, and especially true of Sophocles, that the rituals performed and described onstage seldom proceed without problems and often fail to achieve their intended ends.²³ On the whole, the Greek playwrights were more interested in failed and corrupt rituals than in complete and correct ones. As anthropological studies of ritual have shown, ritual mistakes, deviations, and failures are revealing not only of the ritual process itself

but also of the social, historical, and political context of the ritual in question.²⁴ Problematic rituals, whether problematic because of mistakes in the actual ritual process or because they fail to produce the intended effect despite a correct performance, reveal larger-scale problems in the society in which they are performed and provide an opportunity to see social forces at play that are often masked in “proper” ritual performances.²⁵ On a smaller scale, it is this communicative property of ritual mistakes that I explore here. The mistakes and failures that characterize many if not most of the rituals that occur in the plays of Sophocles behave exactly as Yatromanolakis and Roilos describe in their discussion of ritual poetics,²⁶ presenting a modification of a predictable structure with aesthetic and communicative implications. Based on the analogy between ritual and narrative, ritual errors shape an audience’s perceptions and expectations of both plot progression and character development. When rituals go awry, it generates the expectation that the drama will go awry in a parallel way.

Three principal types of ritual mistakes occur most frequently in Sophocles’ plays: problems of ritual conflation, ritual repetition, and ritual status. While this list is not exhaustive, these three categories accommodate most of the rituals that occur in Sophocles. They also speak directly to issues of dramatic progression and characterization. Other approaches to this ritual material might be possible of course, but an approach guided by the principles of conflation, repetition, and status reveals what is consistent in Sophocles’ use of ritual as a poetic device throughout the extant corpus.

Examples drawn from the *Antigone*, the *Trachiniae*, and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* introduce the three principal Sophoclean ritual mistakes. Each of these plays in its own right could readily be subjected to a full ritual analysis. However, the conclusions that I reach about these three plays using ritual poetics touch on issues that have already received extensive scholarly attention. In particular, as I will briefly discuss, an approach informed by ritual poetics reinforces the work already done on the motifs of marriage to death and burial in the *Antigone*, the anticipated apotheosis of Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, and the issue of dramatic irony in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. I confine my consideration of these well-studied issues to these introductory remarks, and in the rest of the book I focus on plays where ritual poetics offers either a new perspective or clear support for one side of an ongoing debate. Although the *Antigone*, the *Trachiniae*, and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* do not receive extended treatment here, the illustrative examples they provide support my contention that the ritual categories I use in my analysis of Sophoclean rituals can be fruitfully applied to the entire corpus and not just to individual scenes or plays.

Ritual Conflation

“Ritual conflation” describes a situation in which the boundaries separating two typically distinct rituals become permeable, allowing the characteristics of one to influence the perception and interpretation of the other.²⁷ I use the term to describe two possible scenarios. In the first, ritual elements from more than one type of ritual become entangled *within a single scene*. In the second, discussed below, the same kind of ritual occurs in multiple scenes *across the play* in such a way that later scenes evoke earlier ones. When ritual conflation occurs within a single scene, elements of two or more usually distinct rituals become confused. As a result, the competing associations and expectations generated by multiple rituals present the audience with competing information about the characters involved and the likely outcome in terms of the progression of the plot. In particular, the conflation of rituals contributes to a character’s ambiguous presentation, often endowing him with conflicting or even paradoxical roles within a given scene. This affords the audience insight into aspects of character that are difficult to convey by more conventional means of characterization. Ritual conflation, in emphasizing competing character traits and competing roles, reveals especially the difficulty these characters have in communicating with and maintaining stable relationships with other characters, one of the hallmark attributes of the “Sophoclean hero.”²⁸ Characters whom Sophocles has partake in conflated rituals typically have difficulty integrating into any community.

Ritual conflation within a single scene is illustrated by the confusion of funerary and marriage ritual in Sophocles’ *Antigone*.²⁹ As we have already seen, marriage ritual shares a lot with funerary ritual both historically and in literary contexts. The *Antigone* makes the symbolic overlap between these two ritual transitions literal,³⁰ enacting the heroine’s marriage to death by means of an actual journey to the cave where she will die, thus becoming the bride of Hades. Leading up to Antigone’s final scene, Creon repeatedly confuses marriage and death. He claims that Hades is the one who will prevent Antigone’s marriage to his son (Ἀΐδης ὁ παύσων τοῦσδε τοὺς γάμους ἐμοί, 575) and demands that Haemon reject her so that she can marry another in the underworld (ἀποπτύσας οὖν ὥστε δυσμενῇ μέθες / τὴν παῖδ’ ἐν Ἄϊδου τήνδε νυμφεύειν τινί, 653–54).

The ritual expectations that Creon raises are fulfilled in Antigone’s final scene onstage before her imprisonment and suicide. When the Chorus announces her entrance, instead of saying that she is on her way to her grave, her τάφος or τύμβος, it says that she is on her way to her θάλαμος, or bed chamber (804), thereby evoking the marriage relationship. This is a ritual confusion that Antigone herself

perpetuates later in the scene as she addresses the cave as both τῦμβος and νυμφεῖον, bridal chamber (891). While Antigone spends much of this scene lamenting that she will not know marriage before she dies (814–16, 867–68, 876–77, 916–18), she, like Creon, expects that she will find marriage in death, declaring, “I shall marry Acheron” (Ἀχέρωντι νυμφεύσω, 816).

The preliminary phases of two usually independent rituals thus fuse into one in Antigone’s final moments onstage. Overtly, this conflation of two rituals highlights the injustice of her premature death by juxtaposing what might have been (her marriage) with what will be (her death), the bride confused with the corpse. But, more subtly, her confused ritual status also reflects Antigone’s problematic and ill-defined place within her family and within Theban society more broadly.³¹ The ritual conflation that defines her final moments on the stage dovetails with one of the play’s central concerns: namely, her troubled relationship with two different spheres of *philoï*. The first is her too-strong relationship to her birth family, those who, under normal circumstances, would tend to her funeral because she dies unmarried. The second is her insufficiently strong relationship to her future married family, those who would have welcomed her into their household after her marriage with Haemon. Her fierce determination to die for her principles and her extreme devotion to her birth family force a conceptual shift in the identity of these two groups of *philoï*, a shift that the conflation of marriage and death serves to clarify.³² In Antigone’s anticipation of marriage to Acheron, her birth family, dwelling with Hades in the underworld, are redefined as a new kind of marital family, one that will welcome her into their home after her ritual transition. By association, her original marital family through Haemon must now assume the ritual role that would more usually fall to the birth family of an unmarried virgin, that of tending to Antigone’s corpse. The confusion of ritual elements in this scene highlights this unusual exchange of roles. Through the conflation of marriage and funerary rites, this scene shows the strength of Antigone’s devotion to her birth family by construing her ritual transition, a marriage to death, as no transition at all. Ritual does not forge a relationship with a new family but rather reaffirms her relationship with the old one.

Even as Antigone’s stubborn refusal to yield to Creon affirms her intense loyalty to her birth family, however, her final ritualized moments on the stage also present an incitement to both the audience and Antigone herself to question her single-minded determination. The prospect of marriage to Hades prompts her to lament the loss of her earthly marriage to Haemon (814–16, 867–68, 876–77, 916–18). Whereas she once embraced death (461–66), in her last moments on the stage she weeps bitter tears, lamenting rather than welcoming her fate (831–33, 895–96, 933–34). The conflation of two contrasting rituals in the final moments of

Antigone's life helps her to embrace, momentarily, a more normative, balanced set of loyalties that accommodate both birth and married family. The ritual cues in this scene, particularly the way in which they help Antigone to articulate her change of heart by blurring the lines between death and marriage, affirm the virtue of moderation, even though it escapes the play's heroine in the end.

When ritual elements correspond *across the play* (the second type of ritual conflation), ritual activity recalls aspects of an earlier ritual scene, potentially influencing the audience's understanding of the later ritual. Rather than focusing the audience's attention on character, this type of conflation tends to speak to plot progression, particularly affecting the audience's expectations about the ritual's outcome. Conflation across the play prompts the audience to view a ritual action through the lens of an earlier ritual scene. While the later ritual might be open to multiple interpretations and might accommodate several possible outcomes, the audience will be predisposed to anticipate the outcome of the earlier ritual, its understanding of the later scene informed by what has already transpired on the stage. Ritual conflation of this type enriches the audience's dramatic experience, providing them with specific information and evaluative criteria that can be used in predicting what comes next.

The *Trachiniae* offers a good example of this type of ritual conflation in its use of sacrificial imagery. The sacrificial motif first arises when Heracles wishes to sacrifice to Zeus in thanks for his recent success in battle; the ritual is derailed because of the robe Deianeira sends him to wear while he sacrifices. Although Deianeira thinks that she has anointed the robe with a love potion, in reality she has smeared it with the poisonous blood of Nessus and, as a result, Heracles' sacrifice is interrupted and tainted by his brutal suffering. This drives him to redirect his sacrificial violence against an unexpected victim, Lichas, instead of the intended animal victims. Later in the play, Heracles' literal act of sacrifice is conflated with Deianeira's metaphorical self-sacrifice. Her suicide upon discovery of what happened to Heracles is ritualized to mirror many aspects of animal sacrifice. The audience's knowledge of what has happened to Lichas and Heracles will influence their expectations about Deianeira's final moments.

The impetus to compare the two scenes arises when the nurse describes Deianeira approaching the sacrificial altar. This briefly raises the possibility of a conventional sacrifice performed in propitiation for the unintentional poisoning of her husband. However, because the audience has already seen Heracles' well-intentioned sacrifice go terribly wrong, it is predisposed to expect Deianeira's ritual actions to be corrupted in a similar way. At this point the audience already knows the end of the narrative: that Deianeira is dead by her own hand. The reference to the sacrificial altar in the nurse's account shifts the audience's outlook on

what the nurse will say about Deianeira's death, prompting the audience to re-adjust expectations to reflect the outcome of the earlier sacrificial scene. Just as in Heracles' sacrifice, where Lichas becomes the unexpected victim, Deianeira herself becomes an unconventional victim here. As the nurse's account continues, the connection between the two scenes is reinforced by the description of Deianeira suddenly leaping onto her bed and hot tears bursting from her eyes (ἐπενθοροῦς' ἄνω / καθέζετ' ἐν μέσοισιν εὐνατηρίοις, / καὶ δακρύων ῥήξασα θερμὰ νάματα, 917–19). This imagery echoes elements of the earlier sacrifice scene, in which Heracles, "grabbing [Lichas] by the foot, where the ankle joint twists, hurled him against the sea-beaten rock. White marrow flowed from his hair, while the bloody middle of his head was torn to pieces" (μάρψας ποδός νιν, ἄρθρον ἧ λυγίζεται, / ῥίπτει πρὸς ἀμφίκλυστον ἐκ πόντου πέτραν· / κόμης δὲ λευκὸν μυελὸν ἐκκρίνει, μέσου / κρατὸς διασπαρέντος αἵματός θ' ὁμοῦ, 779–82). The nurse's vivid imagery links Deianeira to Lichas by recalling his bodily suffering. In both scenes Lichas and Deianeira get too close to the act of sacrifice, and both abruptly and violently—in two very different senses—lose fluid from their bodies. The knowledge of what happens to Lichas heightens the audience's grim anticipation of what the nurse will say about Deianeira's death. Although death by hanging is the more typically female mode of suicide in Greek tragedy,³³ Deianeira's violent death by the knife is in some senses predictable in light of the sacrificial scene that has come before.

The audience's reception of the nurse's account is equally informed by the similarities linking Deianeira and Heracles in the sacrificial imagery of these scenes. Like Heracles' literal sacrificial scene (753–54), Deianeira's metaphorical one begins when she approaches the altar (904–5). More importantly, her role in the sacrificial scene, like Heracles', becomes confused. Heracles begins as the sacrificial officiant, clearly in control of the ritual, as his cheerful prayer suggests (763–64). The scene ends, however, in chaos as the poisoned robe robs him of his power as ritual agent and forces him into the passive role of victim by the violence it does to his body.³⁴ Heracles is as much a victim of sacrificial violence in this scene as Lichas. The conflation of this scene with that of Deianeira's suicide emphasizes the parallel confusion of ritual roles assigned to Heracles' wife. Deianeira's slaughter by her own hand places her, too, in the conflicting roles of both sacrificer and victim in the ritualized scene.³⁵ Thus when the description of her death is abbreviated because the witnessing nurse must run to fetch help, the conflation of the two sacrificial scenes allows the audience to fill in this gap in the narrative, imagining the scene of Deianeira's death by comparison not only with Lichas' suffering but also with Heracles'. In light of the sacrificial violence of the earlier scene, no audience member is likely to imagine a painless, peaceful death scene for Deianeira. Rather, the audience will fill in this narrative gap with the sacrificial content the play has

already provided. The effect of this ritual conflation is reinforced when Deianeira's corpse is later described as newly sacrificed (νεοσφαγής, 1130).³⁶

Finally, both earlier scenes of sacrifice contribute to the audience's understanding of the final scene in the play, which stages a suffering Heracles giving final instructions to his son. Like Deianeira's suicide, this scene is not literally a sacrifice; however, particularly in the way it establishes Heracles as victim, the *exodos* evokes the sacrificial ritual.³⁷ Heracles himself alerts the audience to the connections between the present scene and the initial sacrificial moment in the play as he declares, "Cenaeum, foundation of altars, if only I, poor wretch, had never seen you; what thanks for what offerings you have accomplished for miserable me, O Zeus" (ὦ Κηναία κρηπίς βωμῶν, / ἦν μή ποτ' ἐγὼ προσιδεῖν ὁ τάλας / ὄφελον ὅσοις, ἱερῶν οἶαν / οἶων ἐπί μοι / μελέω χάριν ἡνύσω, ὦ Ζεῦ, 993–95). In the *exodos* Heracles reprises the role he played in the earlier sacrifice scene, a fact emphasized by the overlapping language used to describe his affliction: the robe clings closely to his sides (777–78 vs. 1053); he is wracked with spasms (805 vs. 1082); the poison attacks his joints (769 vs. 1103); and, most generally, he is overcome by the need to scream and weep (772, 787, 796 vs. 1072, amplified by his actual cries of pain and distress throughout the *exodos*). The conflation of these two scenes, with their emphasis on the ritual violence done to Heracles' body, suggests that the outcome of the earlier scene can be used to predict what will happen now. Heracles, his huge suffering notwithstanding, was not killed by mere poison before and, because of his divine parentage, will not be killed now. The comparison prompted by the conflation of these two scenes suggests intense suffering with no prospect of release.

On the other hand, in addition to reprising his earlier role, Heracles' part in the *exodos* is also analogous to that of both Lichas and Deianeira, who attain release from suffering through sacrificial violence and its gift of death. Deianeira's death in particular resonates with the *exodos* in a way that suggests that Heracles might achieve a similar escape. Deianeira, as the nurse describes, kills herself with a sword plunged into her side (930); Heracles' repeated requests that Hyllus strike him with a sword (1015–16, 1034–35) evoke this earlier violence and suggest that Heracles might attain relief in a similar way. Quite in contrast with the implication that Heracles will not die, the audience is equally confronted with correlations between the *exodos* and Deianeira's suicide that suggest that he wants this outcome and, like Deianeira, might achieve it.

The contrasting signals generated by the conflation of the *exodos* with not one but two earlier scenes that make use of sacrificial themes emphasize Heracles' own hybrid nature. The conflicting expectation that he both will and will not become the sacrificial victim in this newest ritualized scene is accompanied by a confusion of ritual roles, now familiar to the audience, which highlights his dual nature.

Heracles embraces his role as the victim, destined to die, yet still tries to direct his own sacrifice, repeatedly giving instructions to the others and making demands of the gods as to the manner of his death (1015–16, 1033–35, 1041–43, 1085–88, 1193–1202). Once again he takes on the roles of both victim and officiant. These conflicting signals help the audience to understand the importance of the blend of mortal and immortal qualities that define him in this play. In particular, ritual conflation casts him in two different lights in a way that hints broadly at the future awaiting him beyond the end of the drama. Both sets of ritual expectations will be fulfilled. Heracles' mortal side will perish, like Deianeira, when his funeral pyre is lit. However, his immortal side will ascend to Olympus and escape victimhood, an outcome alluded to by his survival in the play's first sacrifice scene.³⁸ The conflation of the *exodos* with two earlier ritual scenes reinforces the audience's understanding of Heracles' status as demigod and their anticipation of the future that awaits him beyond the end of the play.

Ritual Repetition

A second type of ritual mistake found in the Sophoclean corpus is ritual repetition. Rituals are inherently repetitive; one of the defining features of most types of ritual performance is that, within broad parameters, a ritual is the same each time it is performed. Indeed, the success of a ritual is often, in part, defined by how well it reenacts previous iterations of itself.³⁹ Under normal circumstances, ritual repetition occurs within clearly defined boundaries because the impetus to perform the ritual originates outside the ritual context. A father might be prompted to arrange a marriage for his daughter at her coming of age, just as his wife's father did for her. A general might be prompted to make propitiatory sacrifices to Ares as the troops line up for battle, replicating sacrifices he has made before other battles. While, in each case, the ritual closely resembles rites that have taken place before, circumstances that are clearly distinct from any earlier ritual performance determine whether the ritual occurs.

My interest in ritual repetition in Sophocles concerns what happens when the circular nature of ritual performance becomes excessive because the motivation to enact new iterations of the ritual is not external but arises from within the ritual itself. In such cases each ritual performance contains the seeds of the next, giving rise to a potentially infinite series of repetitions. This drive to circular repetition occurs because of problems with the linear progression of the ritual. The ritual remains incomplete, or the ritual contains mistakes or corruptions that demand correction, provoking further ritual action. The signal to stop, which is implicit in the ritual progression under normal circumstances, is therefore missing. New ritual

is perpetually required to address what is problematic in the old. Rather than a predictable ritual progression such as van Gennep or Turner delineates, such excessively repetitive rituals are predictable only to the extent that they consistently allow no progression at all. The watching audience expect only further iterations of the ritual in question.

Some instances of ritual conflation across a play can be analyzed as ritual repetition. In the *Trachiniae*, one could discern a causal link between the three scenes that employ sacrificial imagery, one sacrifice bringing about the next. The conflation of marriage and death ritual in the *Antigone*, which occurs twice more in the play, at Haemon's death and at Eurydice's, could also be analyzed as a self-perpetuating cycle of ritual repetition.⁴⁰ The most important distinction between repetition and conflation as I define them is that the first implies a causal link between the two comparable rituals and the second does not. An examination of ritual repetition focuses on ritual as the driving force in an ongoing cycle of linked events. The key characteristic of such rituals is that one reliably causes the next. Ritual conflation across a play, by contrast, is principally concerned with the audience's perception of the likely outcome of a single ritual action by comparison with an earlier ritual; from this interpretive perspective, any causal relationship between them is incidental. For the sake of clarity, I separate conflation from repetition in my analysis. However, more than one type of ritual error could certainly influence the impact of any given ritual on the audience's perception of a play.

One example of the way in which repetitive ritual can become part of a self-perpetuating cycle is found in the burial motif that informs the plot of the *Antigone*.⁴¹ Ancient Greek funerary custom, as discussed above, normally included repetition, as family members were supposed to visit the tomb of deceased relatives at prescribed intervals after the initial funerary rites were successfully completed. Burial itself, however, was not a repeated action, and the notion that burial might bring about not graveside offerings but rather further acts of burial was not a part of normative Greek funerary custom. The *Antigone* presents rituals that transgress normal parameters, emphasizing the causal relationships linking the play's acts of interment. One burial, through its corrupt elements, brings about the circumstances that necessitate the next burial, apparently ad infinitum. The self-perpetuation of burial ritual in this play both reflects and amplifies the dysfunction of the Theban royal family at the center of the *Antigone*.

The events of the play are set in motion because of Creon's edict that Polyneices must not be buried and Antigone's determination to circumvent that command at any cost. While it is certainly Creon's prerogative as king of Thebes to deny a traitor burial, the fact that Polyneices' corpse is left exposed on the city's land and not in the wild is a clear violation of religious precepts and an invitation to the gods

to punish the city with pollution.⁴² Piety demands burial for the corpse, and Antigone's kinship with Polyneices strengthens her sense of duty. When and how Antigone accomplishes this task and even whether she is actually responsible for this first act of burial have been the subject of much debate.⁴³ But however the burial is accomplished and whatever ritual elements it entails, this ritual redress is ultimately unsuccessful. These secretive actions draw the attention of Creon's guards, who expose the corpse anew and necessitate another burial. The same corpse is buried a second time, a particularly blatant example of repetition that draws the audience's attention to the repeating burial motif right away and insists from the beginning on the importance of this motif in the developing plot.

Antigone's renewed ritual efforts, symbolic dust and libations, are no substitute for a real funeral for Polyneices. Insofar as the plot of this particular play is concerned, it is clear that a corpse merely sprinkled with dust is as much a source of pollution as one that is altogether unburied, as Teiresias' report of sacrificial victims rotting on the altars later confirms (998–1022). But even as Polyneices' situation continues to demand ritual redress, Antigone's attempts to offer her brother appropriate funerary attention advance the ritual cycle further. In response to her ritual actions, Creon "buries" Antigone in a cave that he, Antigone, and Teiresias all refer to as her grave (τάφος, 849, 1039, 1069, 1215). This echoes the play's previous acts of burial and the pollution that results from them. The burial of a living person is a gross violation of Greek funerary rites and, as an inversion of Creon's original crime, reiterates the pollution caused by his refusal to grant burial to a corpse. His punishment of Antigone for her disobedience responds directly to her previous ritual actions; the woman who has been too devoted to Hades will be given a tomb where she may be close to this god in perpetuity.⁴⁴

Though Teiresias ultimately persuades Creon to bury Polyneices and release Antigone, both acts that will address the pollution that has already been generated, the king cannot resolve both ritual problems simultaneously. Creon succeeds in addressing the pollution arising from Polyneices' treatment by providing him with a proper burial,⁴⁵ but he arrives too late to release Antigone before the pollution stemming from her ritual mistreatment elicits a further step in the ritual cycle. Haemon's suicide upon discovering her corpse is another iteration of the burial motif, since Haemon, in his death, shares her polluted tomb. The link between his death and the polluted burial Creon forces on Antigone is made absolutely clear by Teiresias. He predicts that Creon will lose a child as punishment for the blasphemy of confusing the natural boundaries between life and death, denying burial to a corpse and burying a living woman (1064–71).

Haemon's death provokes the next iteration of the cycle of corrupted death and burial presented in the *Antigone* because the news of his death prompts his

mother's suicide. This newest corpse anticipates yet another act of burial, though it is not carried out within the limits of the play and the audience are given no way of knowing what happens to the queen's body. The cycle appears to be accelerating as Creon's discussion of ritual attention for his son is interrupted by the news of Eurydice's death, which elicits a bleak comment: "the harbors of Hades are difficult to purify" (ἰὼ δυσκάθατος Ἄϊδου λιμήν, 1284). Though Teiresias has succeeded in persuading Creon to give Polyneices a proper burial and to release Antigone from her cave prison, reminding him of the proper treatment of both the living and the dead, the ritual lesson seems forgotten in the intensity of the king's grief for wife and child. Creon, who should be responsible for Eurydice's ritual care, now fantasizes about his own death, suggesting no imminent ritual response to the deaths of Haemon and Eurydice and raising the possibility of a new source of pollution similar to that created by Polyneices' unburied corpse.⁴⁶

The repetition of the burial motif in the *Antigone* offers an easily discernible ritual logic that helps the audience to understand and even anticipate the forward movement of the plot. Frequent references to burial confirm that one polluted ritual reliably generates the need for the next. This reinforces the hopelessness of the play's final scene, the expectation of the continuation of the existing ritual pattern superseding any expectation that Creon will somehow break the pattern and avoid further pollution. In the burial motif of the *Antigone*, the audience is shown one manifestation of a larger pattern of repetition and return that afflicts the city of Thebes. Zeitlin describes this phenomenon:

In Thebes the linear advance of the narrative events turns out in the end to be circular, as closed back upon itself as the circular walls that are the city's most distinctive architectural feature in space. Time in Thebes returns always and again to its point of departure, since it can never generate new structures and new progeny that can escape the paradigmatic patterns of the beginning. What this means is that Thebes is a place where the past inevitably rules, continually repeating and renewing itself so that each new generation, each new episode in the story, looks backward to its ruin even as it offers a new variation on the theme.⁴⁷

Although the mythological tradition is nearly silent on what happens after the events of the *Antigone*, the pattern of ritual repetition that informs the trajectory of this play's plot and of the fate of Thebes more broadly predicts only further repetition beyond the end of the play.⁴⁸ The repetition of the corrupted burial motif conditions the audience, even though they are not shown what happens next, to anticipate the worst.

Excessive ritual repetition also informs the narrative progression of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where consulting the Delphic oracle and reacting to its message consistently leads to circumstances that demand further prophecy. As we have seen, the process of obtaining and reacting to an oracle offers an example of van Gennep's rite-of-passage motif. The standard tripartite progression involved in seeking an oracle shapes the way in which the audience perceives the abnormal repetition of prophecy in the plot of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. This play shows what happens when the third step of the prophetic ritual progression is problematic, specifically because those who receive oracles refuse the answer offered and attempt to avert the oracle's fulfillment. In this play, efforts to ignore or avoid the change of status predicted by Delphi always prove fruitless and, moreover, generate pollution.⁴⁹ This pollution, in turn, necessitates new oracles to address the consequences of ignoring the old ones, contributing to a potentially endless cycle of ritual repetition.

There has been a great deal of discussion as to what motivates the forward momentum of the plot in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. There is no external necessity, scholars point out, for Oedipus to discover that the fate he has assiduously avoided for much of his life has already come to pass. This raises the question of what internal motivation the play offers for the drive to self-discovery that he evidently feels. It is certainly possible to understand the play's forward movement as a function of Oedipus' character and his identity as a tragic hero or as a function of Greek ideas about fate and the divine.⁵⁰ However, without discounting these forces, my reading emphasizes the role played by ritual in driving the plot. An appeal to ritual poetics reveals an underlying pattern of ritual repetition that continually motivates new ritual action. Close attention to ritual cues in this play offers one explanation for the development of the plot and helps to articulate the anticlusal nature of elements in the play's *exodos*.

Four oracles are alluded to in the course of the play. First is the oracle given to Laius, predicting that if he fathers a son, his son will kill him. The second is the oracle that Oedipus receives as a boy, which states that he will kill his father and marry his mother. The third, reported by Creon, states that the plague at Thebes will be lifted if Laius' murderer is exiled or killed. And a fourth is sought by Creon in order to determine what is to be done with the blinded Oedipus at the end of the play. Examined in chronological order (rather than the order in which they are presented in the drama), it is clear that these oracles both give structure to and motivate the events of the plot. The fulfillment of each oracle is eventually revealed to be the result of a concerted effort to prove that oracle false.⁵¹ In each case, the attempt to avoid predicted suffering inevitably leads to suffering nonetheless, which prompts new visits to Delphi and further predictions of suffering. The cycle, as presented in this play, is inescapable, and it is within this framework that

the audience must interpret the final incomplete prophetic progression introduced in the *exodos*.

Laius' attempt to avoid his predicted fate through the exposure of his son is the vital action from which all other actions in this play stem.⁵² Most obviously, the exposure brings Oedipus to Corinth, where, eventually, he is confronted with the claim that Polybus and Merope are not his true parents and is spurred to consult the Delphic oracle himself. Told not who his parents are but only that he will kill one and marry the other, Oedipus now faces the same choice as his father—accept the truth of the oracle or attempt to avert it—and, indeed, he makes the same decision. Like Laius, Oedipus refuses to accept that his fate is inevitable. Just as Laius attempts to solve his problem by removing Oedipus from his household, Oedipus removes himself from the household of Polybus and Merope, believing that he cannot harm these parents if he never sees them.⁵³ Ultimately, the avoidant behavior of both father and son is precisely what brings about the fulfillment of the predictions they attempt to avoid. The way in which the play presents these parallel reactions to the Pythia—both accounts delayed until the middle of the play and then presented not seventy lines apart—reinforces the sense that the son is repeating the actions of his father.⁵⁴ This juxtaposition of similar ritual reactions also emphasizes the causal force of the prophecies in this play. Laius' reaction to the predictions of Apollo causes not only his own murder at the crossroads but also the fulfillment of the oracle Oedipus receives.

Unlike Laius' reaction to prophecy, which the audience must imagine through Jocasta's narrative, Oedipus' reaction is displayed on the stage. As Richard Minadeo points out, Oedipus' confrontation with Teiresias reenacts the original consultation of Apollo and shows the audience a version of what must have happened when Oedipus received the oracle for the first time.⁵⁵ Sophocles appears to collapse the time separating the two incidents when he has Teiresias respond to Oedipus, saying, "Did you not understand before?" (οὐχὶ ξυνήκας πρόσθεν; 360).⁵⁶ The way in which πρόσθεν applies equally to the original consultation and the current conversation highlights Oedipus' failure to accept the inevitable on both occasions. The sense of a cyclical pattern of receiving and rejecting oracles, demonstrated by juxtaposing Laius' story with Oedipus' later on in the play, is reinforced by this repetition of Oedipus' response to the oracle, strengthening the sense of foreboding the audience surely feels at this point in the narrative.

The next oracle in absolute chronological order is one of the first events of the play. Oedipus has sent Creon to Delphi to find out how to bring to an end the plague in Thebes, and Creon is told that Laius' murderer must be either killed or banished (95–111). The mythically astute audience is aware that the plague and the associated need to consult Apollo are the direct result of Oedipus' attempt to

avoid the fulfillment of the Pythia's earlier predictions, a first example of cause and effect introduced at the beginning of the play. Oedipus' inconsistency in relying on Delphi now when he had earlier tried to prove Apollo false contributes to the irony of these early scenes. But the full dramatic importance of the oracle that Creon brings from Delphi and its place in the repetitive cycle of dismissed oracles is not fully revealed until the end of the play. The final scene shows Oedipus in all his horror: blinded, disgraced, and polluted. His attempts to ignore Apollo have nonetheless brought him to the realization of his fate. It is at this point that Creon, now aware that Oedipus has killed Laius, must decide what is to be done with the ruined king. The terms of the oracle that Creon received at the beginning of the play are clear: in order to save Thebes from the plague, Laius' murderer must be either killed or sent into exile. Instead of following the god's instructions, however, Creon determines to send once more to Delphi (1438–39). It seems that the extreme pollution and violence of Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' blinding make Creon doubt the initial command of the god or, at the very least, make him seek assurance that the original instructions still pertain. This is now the third time that the predictions of the oracle have been doubted, and there is every reason for the audience to expect this newest iteration of the ongoing ritual cycle to follow the same course as the previous ones. Ignoring the oracle's instructions has, until now, led only to further pollution. Familiar ritual cues imply that similar pollution will arise from Creon's decision to put off the Pythia's instructions.

Scholars have long debated about how to interpret the ending of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, especially the fact that, contrary to Apollo's instructions, Oedipus is not banished but ushered into the palace at the end of the play.⁵⁷ Many interpretations highlight the lack of closure this unexpected turn of events offers, emphasizing in particular the fact that the intense dramatic irony that informs most of the play is absent in the *exodos*, since the audience is now as ignorant of the future as Oedipus himself.⁵⁸ Although I would agree that the play is indeed open-ended and lacks a clear sense of closure, I would also argue that ritual cues preclude the audience's total ignorance of the future and, in fact, encourage them to anticipate what will happen beyond the end of the play.⁵⁹ It is clear that one of the things that will happen immediately after the play ends is another consultation of the Delphic oracle. This represents the fourth iteration of this particular ritual action in the play. In each of the three previous instances, the recipient of the oracle—Laius, Oedipus, Creon—has chosen to ignore or attempt to circumvent its fulfillment. In the first two examples, this leads to further pollution—Laius' murder and the Theban plague—which, in turn, demands further oracles. Because the events of the *exodos* align with this repetitive pattern, what I would call ritual poetics gives the audience a way of anticipating the general outline of the future, even if its

members can no longer know its specific details. The ritual pattern of repeated oracular dismissal underscores the circular nature of events in Thebes.⁶⁰ What the Athenian audience knew of the future of this cursed family from the mythical tradition confirms what the ritual pattern insinuates.

Ritual Status

The third and final ritual problem that occurs frequently in Sophocles is connected to the status of ritual participants. It is possible for a ritual to be performed in its entirety without errors and still fail to yield a valid outcome because one or more of those involved in its performance cannot participate legitimately. The individual might lack ritual status for many reasons: age, gender, citizenship, pollution, political position, and any number of other metrics of group belonging relevant to participation in a particular ritual. The individual lacking status might say the right words and perform the right deeds associated with the correct performance of the ritual. Ultimately, however, his lack of appropriate status indicates to the observer that the ritual has not actually been performed or, more accurately, that the ostensible outcome of the ritual is not its actual outcome. Such problems of status generate a kind of cognitive dissonance in the observing spectators. On the one hand, clear signals indicate that the ritual they have observed is not legitimate and has no force as a ritual; on the other hand, just seeing the ritual performed correctly and in full generates certain reactions and expectations in spite of problems of legitimacy.⁶¹

To offer a modern example by way of illustration, suppose that a person who was legally married left his or her spouse and participated in a second wedding ceremony with a new partner.⁶² While those invited to witness the marriage might be genuinely convinced of the love and commitment demonstrated by the couple during the ritual, and while the ceremony might be completed correctly and in full by a legitimate officiant, the ritual would not result in a legal marriage, and the married individual would remain married to his or her existing partner. Those in the audience of this fictional wedding, like the ancient theater audience witnessing a problematic ritual in a play, would receive conflicting messages as a result of the status problems affecting the ritual participant. In the context of a play, the tension between these opposing messages provides the audience with a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the character involved in the ritual and likely influences expectations as to how the plot will unfold.

In the context of ancient tragedy, an audience's ability to perceive and evaluate the tension that arises from rituals that are problematic because of status problems is informed by two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of real-world ritual rules and

knowledge of the mythical tradition. This information affords the audience a quasi-divine perspective vis-à-vis the characters on the stage. The audience can see with a clarity often not available to the characters themselves that incorrect status nullifies any benefits that these characters might receive from the ritual and any obligations that they might incur. The audience's ritual knowledge creates the expectation of ritual failure. At the same time, an understanding of the mythical tradition allows the audience to perceive where the characters' actions, ritual and otherwise, ought to lead in terms of canonical mythical outcomes. Sometimes this means that the audience will expect the ritual to fail; more often it means that the audience will expect it to succeed. In the Sophoclean corpus, the ostensible outcome of these kinds of rituals usually aligns with mythical orthodoxy. In other words, Sophocles often constructs ritual scenarios such that, if the characters performing these rituals *did* possess the correct status, their outcome would dovetail with what the audience knows to be mythically necessary. Such rituals create the dramatic expectation of success.

Rituals that are affected by problems of status, therefore, generate competing expectations. The audience expects these rituals to fail on the basis of ritual knowledge but expects or at least hopes that they will succeed on the basis of mythical knowledge. Such rituals also suggest how this tension between the ritual expectation of failure and the dramatic expectation of success can be relieved—namely, by addressing the status problems affecting the play's characters. The audience, with its godlike foresight, well-versed in both ritual and myth, will understand that resolving ambiguities of status and reintegrating isolated characters into the appropriate communities would unify expectations. A character with the appropriate ritual status would not merely allude to the correct mythical outcome in his ritual actions but would actually take steps toward that outcome by performing the rituals. The realignment of an audience's divergent ritual and dramatic expectations in this way contributes to a sense of dramatic closure. Plays in which key characters do not attain the appropriate ritual status within the parameters of the play, including nearly all of Sophocles' protagonists, are unable to achieve complete closure.

An example of the poetic effect of problems of ritual status can be found in the final scene of the *Trachiniae*, in which Heracles, though he is still a living man, attempts to direct his own funeral.⁶³ This logical impossibility enacted on the stage in the *exodos* is anticipated by the deep uncertainty that surrounds Heracles for much of the play, generating a similar, if less substantial, confusion between life and death. When the play opens, Deianeira reports a prophecy that places Heracles at a critical juncture between two possible futures: he will either end his life in suffering or enjoy a peaceful and prosperous existence until old age (79–81, 164–74). These conflicting outcomes remain equally possible for much of the play, as Deianeira's

fretful questions about Heracles constantly remind the audience (73, 181–83, 232–33). Even after Heracles has been poisoned, his status remains uncertain. As he delivers the news that Heracles is being returned to Trachis, Hyllus cannot say whether his father lives or dies, reporting to Deianeira that “shortly you will look upon him, either living or recently passed away” (καί νιν αὐτίκα / ἢ ζῶντ’ ἐσόψεσθ’ ἢ τεθνηκότ’ ἄρτιως, 805–6).

When Heracles begins to tend to his own funeral in the final scene of the *Trachiniae*, giving instructions for both the construction of a pyre and the behavior of the mourners (1193–1202), the contradictory nature of his actions resonates with both the ambiguity of the prophecy and Deianeira’s anxiety. The familiar confusion between life and death persists as Heracles begs somebody to kill him and end his pain (1015–16, 1034–35, 1041–42, 1086–87), yet speaks of himself as already dead (1143–44, 1146).⁶⁴ His equivocal status, as both a living corpse and a dead funeral officiant, is further emphasized by the juxtaposition with the similarly ambiguous Nessus. At the moment of his own death, the hero remarks that Nessus has fulfilled a paradoxical prophecy that Heracles was fated to lose his life at the hands of one who already lived in Hades (1159–61). Deianeira, who is also dead and yet equally Heracles’ murderer, offers another parallel emphasizing Heracles’ ambiguous status, though Heracles does not remark on it.

In ritual terms, the funeral that Sophocles presents in the final scene of the *Trachiniae* is doomed to fail. While Hyllus is eventually persuaded to build the pyre, he stubbornly refuses to perform the crucial act of lighting it (1214), something that Heracles cannot, for some reason, do himself. And, as Holt notes, no arrangements are made for Heracles’ body after the cremation,⁶⁵ let alone for the ongoing care of his grave. In ritual terms, Heracles is incapable of managing the aspects of his funeral that can take place only after his death. The audience’s ritual expectations, therefore, are that this unusual funeral must fail as a ritual.

In dramatic terms, however, the audience’s expectations of this funeral scene are determined by familiarity with the myths of Heracles. The knowledgeable audience will recall the story of his birth and his mixed parentage: one mortal parent and one immortal. In his very origin, Heracles partakes in both eternal life and inevitable death. His past heroic exploits confirm his hybrid nature, showing him as capable of transgressing the boundary between life and death in retrieving Cerberus (mentioned by Heracles at 1097–98) and rescuing Theseus from the underworld. Consonant with his portrayal in the *Trachiniae*, the Heracles of myth is also a figure who apparently moves easily between life and death, accomplishing almost effortlessly what other heroes accomplish only with great difficulty. An audience observing him acting out his strange funeral ritual will therefore anticipate its efficacy on the basis of the hero’s past record of successfully negotiating the

boundary between life and death, even as ritual knowledge suggests that the funeral cannot succeed.

The mythical tradition speaks not only to Heracles' past but also to his future, an awareness of which bestows godlike insight on the audience. This future is evoked by one important detail of the funeral ritual: the emphasis on Heracles' pyre. While Hyllus refuses to light it, the knowledgeable audience member will be aware that Philoctetes would later perform this service, burning away Heracles' mortal half and readying him for his ascent to Olympus as a fully divine being. As often in Sophocles, therefore, the problematic ritual itself suggests the solution to its own inefficacy. In this case, the pyre that Hyllus now refuses to light alludes to Heracles' future position as a god, implying the necessary changes to his status that would make his funeral ritual legitimate, or at least effective. While a human could never negotiate his own transition into the community of the dead, a god could certainly facilitate his own admission into Olympus. And the aspects of Heracles' funeral that he is unable to manage as a demigod will prove superfluous once he has been deified; a god, unlike a mortal, does not require a resting place for his corpse or mourners to tend his grave.

In anticipating Heracles' apotheosis,⁶⁶ the ritual with which the *Trachiniae* ends anticipates the resolution of his ambiguous status. The ritual problems at the end of the play look forward to Heracles' integration into the company of the gods, where his status will no longer be problematic in a community of divine peers. The ritual that ends the play allows the audience to foresee how their competing ritual and dramatic expectations could be realigned if Heracles' status were corrected within the play. Since the play takes place entirely on the mortal plane—indeed, not even a *deus ex machina* anticipates Heracles' place on Olympus—such resolution is unattainable within the bounds of the drama, and the *exodos* leaves his ambiguous status unresolved. For Charles Segal, this scene and its references to Heracles' pyre on Mount Oeta juxtapose the order of ritual, in which the pyre is a ritual reward for Heracles, and the “in-betweenness” of tragedy, in which the pyre is a symbol of his ambiguous status.⁶⁷ I would argue instead that in this particular scene, ritual has been co-opted for tragic purposes and is itself a signifier of ambiguity. Indeed, for those mortal characters who share in Heracles' final moments as a demigod but will have no share in his future life on Olympus, the future holds only further ambiguity. The discomfort that many audiences feel, for example, at Heracles' insistence that Hyllus should now marry Iole, the woman at least partly responsible for his parents' deaths,⁶⁸ is certainly a reflection of the lack of closure available at the end of this play.

The opening scenes of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* offer further examples of rituals that fail as rituals but have important dramatic consequences because of the status

of the character performing them. In these scenes Oedipus' involvement in both supplication and curse ritual has little or no appreciable ritual impact because he himself is both the author of each ritual and simultaneously the problem that the ritual seeks to address. In the opening scene, for example, the steps of a normative supplication are followed.⁶⁹ The priest and his fellow Thebans approach Oedipus, identify themselves as suppliants with branches, make their verbal request of him, and receive his positive answer. However, the suppliants' false assumptions about Oedipus' identity problematize this apparently proper ritual. So far from having the power to help remove the pollution from Thebes, Oedipus is its cause, rendering the promise he makes to pursue the culprit, whom he assumes to be another man, meaningless.⁷⁰ In ritual terms, the audience has no reason to expect Oedipus' ritual obligation to hold even though he has performed his role in the ritual perfectly.

The same is true of the curse that Oedipus utters.⁷¹ While, as noted above, curses are often merely ancillary to other rituals, in this play, for obvious reasons, Oedipus' curses receive a lot of attention. In ritual terms, the problem is that he utters a curse whose intended object is another Theban but whose actual object, unbeknownst to the Theban king, is himself. The curse is, as a result, demonstrably ineffective. Oedipus curses the murderer—that is, he curses himself—with ritual exclusion and with banishment from the land for his crime (236–43). However, the polluted Oedipus is at this exact moment taking part in a ritual action in Thebes, belying his own words. Similarly, Oedipus curses those who take no action with barrenness, with failed crops, and with stillbirths (269–72). This is, of course, what is already happening to Thebes, as the priest describes (25–30), and so Oedipus' curse can have no discernible impact in the play. For all that Oedipus appears to deliver the curse with every expectation that the gods will fulfill it, the audience will not expect the curse to have any effect. And, indeed, these ritual expectations prove justified as Oedipus is ushered back into the palace at the end of the play, though the terms of the curse should result in his immediate banishment if not his death.

In spite of the failure of Oedipus' supplication and curse in ritual terms, both rituals are dramatically effective on the basis of the audience's mythical knowledge. Indeed, the dramatic impact of the story that Sophocles tells relies on that mythical knowledge. With access to privileged information that the characters onstage do not yet possess, the audience is all too aware of Oedipus' true identity, which is dual in nature. The audience can see that if he possessed only one of his identities, the rituals would not fail. If Oedipus were only the king of Thebes, the commitments he makes to his citizens through both supplication and curse ritual would yield legitimate ritual outcomes. If Oedipus were only Laius' murderer, then he would never have been asked as king to perform these rituals in the first place, resolving

the problem in a different way. Oedipus, however, cannot dissociate himself from any aspect of his identity. Unlike Heracles, whose ritual status problems entail resolving his dual nature into a singular identity and integrating into a new community, Oedipus has no way of disambiguating his hybrid nature. The problem is not that he is both Laius' successor and his murderer and should only be one of these, but rather that he has yet to recognize and embrace both parts of his identity, as the audience knows he must. The audience enjoys an almost divine insight into Oedipus' situation, putting audience members to some degree on a level with the Pythia herself.

The rituals that Oedipus performs, therefore, succeed dramatically, if not ritually, because they drive him toward the play's necessary conclusion, the self-discovery that the audience knows he must make. These rituals generate competing ritual and dramatic expectations that allow the audience to anticipate the course of the plot and appreciate the complexity of Oedipus' identity. The audience will not expect him to be able to uphold the obligations he makes through supplication and curse ritual because of his dual status. Audience members will, however, expect these ritual obligations to guide his future actions. Because Oedipus acts as though he could fulfill his promises, he moves the play ever closer to its mythically necessary dénouement and his terrible self-discovery.

As the play reaches its inevitable conclusion, the tension between ritual and dramatic expectations is resolved. Equipped with new knowledge of his own identity, Oedipus now performs the same rituals as in the beginning of the play but alters his role in them to reflect the part of his identity he has just discovered. Ritual and dramatic effect converge as Oedipus curses the shepherd he has now securely identified as his childhood savior (1349–53), though before he cursed Laius' killer without realizing that he was the object of his own curse; he also becomes a suppliant of Creon (1432–34), though he once received suppliants himself.⁷² This dual reversal of Oedipus' ritual role acknowledges the criminal responsibility that he could not accept earlier in the play because of his ignorance, but without rejecting his equally important identity as king of Thebes. The rituals in the *exodos* of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* complement the rituals in the first part of the play; they bring out the aspects of Oedipus' identity that were initially concealed and so lay bare the full ambiguity of this most ambiguous of tragic characters. In one sense this provides a kind of closure, resolving the tension between ritual and dramatic expectations that has made this play so intensely ironic. Yet this ending allows only for the recognition of ambiguity and not its resolution, since, as Rachel Kitzinger points out, the audience's superior knowledge of Oedipus' life and fate runs out at the end of the play.⁷³ This is a problem that Sophocles would take up again in the *Oedipus at Colonus*.

This chapter has demonstrated the ubiquity of the three principal categories of ritual mistake that I have identified—ritual conflation, ritual repetition, and ritual status—in Sophocles' plays. Examples from the *Antigone*, the *Trachiniae*, and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* show how these ritual problems correspond to elements of the plot of each play and to the status and identity of each play's central characters. Although some examples represent isolated ritual problems in individual scenes, many point to a broader kind of analysis that considers the progression of the plot as a dramatic unity. At this point, I turn to this broader perspective and examine in detail the way in which ritual conflation informs both the plot of the *Ajax* and the presentation of its title character.

2 Ritual Conflation in the *Ajax*

κούκ ἔστ' ἄελπτον οὐδέν . . .

[Nothing is unexpected.]

Aj. 648

The poetic effects of the rituals in the *Ajax* are most easily observed if we consider the play in three parts, each principally concerned with one conflated ritual. Other tripartite divisions of the play are certainly possible,¹ and the logic of the play also allows for a two-part division in which Ajax's suicide is the fulcrum on which the halves are balanced.² However, the division of the play into three parts on the basis of ritual criteria best illustrates the role that these rituals play in shaping the audience's perception of the trajectory of the plot and the character of Ajax himself.

In essence the play presents its audience with a sequence of three ritual scenes, each one conflated internally within its own part of the play. The first part of the *Ajax* (1–645) deals with the immediate aftermath of Ajax's slaughter of the herds. The slaughter itself is described retrospectively as a sacrificial ritual, but the fallout from Ajax's ritualized violence blurs the lines between sacrifice and funerary ritual, generating competing images of Ajax the officiant and Ajax the victim. The second part (646–865) is concerned with Ajax's suicide, which is at first falsely presented as an act of purification but later proves to be ritualized as another act of sacrifice. Ajax is portrayed as both the officiant to be purified by blood and the sacrificial victim whose blood is required. The third part (866–1420) concerns the discovery of Ajax's body and the ensuing fight over its treatment. As Ajax's family and friends fight over his burial, the funeral they attempt to arrange becomes confused with

both supplication and curse rituals, creating the somewhat paradoxical impression that the corpse is both in need of protection and a source of protection.

These examples of internal conflation in individual ritual scenes highlight the contradictions inherent in Ajax's character, which render his relationships with the various communities referenced in the play (his family, the Greek army, etc.) problematic. The roles assigned to Ajax in all these rituals are inconsistent and contradictory, resulting each time in a ritual that is in some way "incorrect" and unsuccessful in integrating him into any community within the bounds of the play. These repeated ritual failures lie at the heart of the tragedy of the *Ajax*, stressing the hero's complete isolation. His participation in rituals that cast him in conflicting roles continually emphasizes his persistent liminal status and the failure of the re-integration phase, as the play's successive rituals prove to be unable to respond appropriately to the changes of status he undergoes. Ritual cues convey to the audience that this play is fundamentally the story of a man unable to achieve a secure place in any community.

The *Ajax* not only conflates multiple kinds of ritual within individual ritual scenes but also conflates elements from rituals that are separated from each other in the play's timeline. For example, the description of Ajax's sword in part II quotes the description of his sword in part I, highlighting the fact that this weapon has a similar function in each ritualized scene. Similarly, the purifying *loutra* proposed for Ajax's burial in part III refer directly to the *loutra* that Ajax proposes to perform himself in part II. In these and other examples of ritual conflation across the play, the evocation of a previous ritual action encourages the audience to use what it knows about the earlier ritual outcome to anticipate and interpret the way in which the latter ritual plays out. This is especially true when, as often, the earlier outcome appears to be at odds with the trajectory of the later scene. In this play, the dramatic effect of this kind of conflation is uniformly negative. In some instances ritual conflation generates the expectation that an earlier ritual problem will be repeated, as in the case of the sword and its violent, polluted connotations. In other circumstances conflation generates doubt as to the efficacy of a given ritual, as in the case of the purifying *loutra* proposed for Ajax's burial, which failed to purify earlier in the play. These ritual connections across the play are not superficial ones that might connect any rituals with similar features; rather, they are founded on deep congruencies of language and circumstance that suggest a deliberate poetic choice on Sophocles' part. They encourage the audience to be constantly looking backward to earlier moments in the play.

Since the play's ritual content supports a tripartite division, it is tempting to look for larger patterns in the macrostructure of the *Ajax*, particularly in relation to van Gennepe's tripartite rite of passage. As we have seen, this model describes

ritual as a transition that progresses from a preliminary phase (separating the ritual participants from everyday society) through a liminal phase (during which the participants undergo some type of transition) to a postliminal phase (as ritual participants are reintegrated into society).³ The three principal scenes that make up the plot of the *Ajax*—the aftermath of the slaughter of the herds, Ajax’s suicide, and the efforts to secure his burial—each contain a dominant ritual action that is staged only in part, in each case offering only one step of the full tripartite progression. These three principal plot points characterize the play as a whole as a kind of ritual sequence in its own right. Part I of the play stages only the postliminal phase of the ritualized slaughter of the herds, merely narrating the preliminary and liminal stages. Part II relegates the preliminaries of Ajax’s suicide to the space offstage and interrupts the aftermath with new ritual concerns. This middle section of the play highlights the liminal phase of the ritual through the unusual solo appearance of Ajax onstage in the moments before he kills himself. Finally, part III shows only the preliminary elements of Ajax’s funeral, not the funeral itself and not its aftermath.

As this description illustrates, the rituals in the *Ajax* move through van Gennep’s progression in reverse order. As a result, while the plot progresses from beginning to middle to end, at the broadest level ritual opens up a parallel channel of meaning in the play. Through its three principal scenes with their ritual components, the *Ajax* presents a macro-progression that moves from end to middle to beginning, tracing the pattern of a reverse rite of passage. Athena’s comment at the beginning of the play, just before the entrance of the Chorus, may subtly make the audience more receptive to the idea of reversal. She tells Odysseus, “Know that a day brings low all mortal affairs and then raises them up again” (ὥς ἡμέρα κλίνει τε κἀνάγει πάλιν / ἅπαντα τὰνθρώπεια, 131–32). In articulating this universal principle of reversal, she perhaps makes the audience more likely to pick up on the larger ritual pattern that informs the play. Narrative and ritual in this play develop in opposite directions, and this chiastic movement across the play contributes to the ambiguity of its *exodos*: Ajax’s forthcoming funeral both offers and undermines closure in the final scene. The funeral offers the audience catharsis as the endpoint of the forward-moving narrative progression but, simultaneously, this incomplete ritual denies straightforward closure as the final (and paradoxically preliminary) phase in a rite of passage that moves in reverse.

In sum, the problem that Ajax poses to the Greek community, the source of the tragedy that informs the plot of the *Ajax*, is ultimately articulated through ritual in three ways. First, Ajax’s conflicting roles in each of the play’s conflated rituals emphasize his inability to integrate into any stable community. Second, the conflation of later rituals with earlier ones undermines the expected success of many of the play’s ritual actions and undercuts any suggestion of a possible reconciliation

between Ajax and the other characters in the play. Finally, the overarching anti-closural nature of the ritual progression that defines the play as a whole presents the audience with a subtle but perceptible reverse rite of passage. This sequence undermines the sense of closure created by the narrative movement from beginning to end by moving from end to beginning on the level of ritual. Taken together, these three aspects of the *Ajax*'s ritual content all weaken the resolution that the play's *exodos* purports to offer. The anticipation of Ajax's funeral at the end of the play is more complicated than commentators typically suggest. Even though burial ritual was regularly associated with both catharsis and closure in Athenian drama, and has these associations in the *Ajax*, when considered in relation to the rest of the ritual content in the play, Ajax's expected burial is equally anticlosural.

Part I—The Sacrificial Slaughter of the Herds

While Ajax's slaughter of the animals captured by the Greek army is not a literal act of ritual sacrifice, it is certainly ritualized by the language used to describe it.⁴ Most overtly, repeated use of the verb σφάζω and its cognates ritualizes the scene by evoking the act of sacrifice and, in particular, the violence of slitting the victim's throat.⁵ Tecmessa, for example, describes the outcome of Ajax's madness with ritualized language, saying, "Such are the sacrificial victims, slain by his hand and dipped in blood, that you would see inside his tent" (τοιαῦτ' ἄν ἴδοις σκηνῆς ἔνδον / χειροδάκτυα σφάγι' αἰμοβαφῇ, 218–19). She employs the verb σφάζω twice in the course of recounting Ajax's violent actions to the Chorus (235, 299) and reinforces this with two additional words that evoke the butchery of the sacrifice: αὐχενίζω ("to cut the throat," 298) and ῥαχίζω ("to cleave the spine," 299).⁶ Even Ajax himself, once free of his divinely inspired madness, refers to the carcasses in his tent as "fresh-sacrificed slaughter" (νεοσφαγῇ . . . φόνον, 546). The repetition of this family of words in the first part of the *Ajax* insists that the violence of Ajax's offstage actions be understood as having the qualities of a ritual sacrifice.

In addition to prominent use of words related to σφάζω, other details suggest strongly that the ancient audience would interpret Ajax's actions as sacrificial. In the *parodos*, even though the Chorus has heard only rumors of the slaughter and does not yet know the details, it speculates about Ajax's actions in a way that suggests sacrifice. Although the Chorus guesses incorrectly when it imagines that Ajax might have been driven mad because of an offense against Artemis (172–78), Alexander Garvie proposes that it nonetheless characterizes Ajax's actions correctly with this suggestion by evoking Artemis' association with sacrificial violence.⁷ More directly, when Ajax raises up his victims (ἀνελών, 237), he imitates the actions of an actual sacrificial officiant. This image of Ajax as officiant is presented more

than once; in conjunction with the explicit act of σφαγή mentioned at line 299, Ajax is also described as turning his victims to face upward (ἄνω τρέπων, 298), which, as Jean Casabona points out, makes use of the technical term for lifting the muzzle of an animal victim in a sacrificial context.⁸ Finally, at lines 238–39 Ajax is described as cutting out the tongue of one of his victims, perhaps alluding to a practice common among officiants at Athenian sacrifices who reserved the tongue as a special portion for themselves.⁹ Taken together, all these details confirm that the audience would have understood Ajax’s nighttime violence as sacrificial.

If Ajax’s actions are to be assessed as a metaphorical sacrifice, this sacrifice must be considered both failed and corrupt. At heart, ritual sacrifice can be understood as facilitating two kinds of community: the reciprocal relationship between gods and mortals and peaceful, cooperative human community.¹⁰ Ajax’s sacrifice, far from facilitating community, creates distance between the hero and all others.¹¹ His ritual actions do bring Athena to the stage and prompt Ajax to offer her a share of the spoils of his violence (92–93). However, the exchange between goddess and hero reveals a sharp contrast between her feigned support and her true anger at the *hubris*¹² that led to his madness and corrupt ritual actions in the first place. Ajax clearly fails to establish a positive relationship with the divine by his sacrificial violence.

His ritualized actions also undermine his human relationships. The slaughter of the herds earns him the lasting enmity of Menelaus and Agamemnon, and even the compassionate Odysseus is afraid to approach him in the immediate aftermath (74–88). The slaughter of the herds also weakens even formerly strong relationships. The Chorus of loyal sailors finds Ajax drastically changed by his ritual experience and therefore hard to care for (δυσθεράπευτος, 609). The Chorus complains to Ajax upon his return, “I do not know how to restrain you or how to allow you to speak, since you have fallen into such misfortunes” (οὔτοι σ’ ἀπείργειν οὔδ’ ὅπως ἐὼ λέγειν / ἔχω, κακοῖς τοιοῖσδε συμπεπωκότα, 428–29). In the face of Tecmessa’s attempts to supplicate Ajax in the name of her own safety and that of their son, the hero is insensible to the fears of his concubine, making clear the great distance between them. He never directly answers her first pleas (492–95) and refuses her second request altogether (587–90). It is obvious that despite the community-building function of sacrifice under normal circumstances, Ajax’s ritualized actions have harmed all his relationships.

There are certainly corrupt aspects of the physical act of slaughter Ajax perpetuates that might explain its failure to facilitate his relationships, both divine and human.¹³ However, the focus in this section of the play is, instead, the many problems in that ritual’s postliminal phase, the only part of this initial ritual action that is staged and not merely described. While Greek ritual orthodoxy accommodated a wide variety of acceptable postsacrifice practices—for example, dividing portions

of the meat or feasting as a community¹⁴—Ajax’s violence is followed by none of the usual ritual motions. Instead, Sophocles describes a scene that strongly evokes the preliminary rites for a funeral.¹⁵ Though portrayed previously as taking on the role of sacrificial officiant, in the aftermath of the violence Ajax more closely resembles the victims of his own violence and, in particular, is described as a corpse laid out in *prothesis* for burial.

The funereal atmosphere of the opening scenes is certainly augmented by Ajax’s insinuations and even frank declarations that he wishes to die (391, 479–80, 565–77). It is also Ajax who brings up the etymology of his own name and its association with lament through its close affinity to the cry αἰᾶ.¹⁶ Corroborating what Ajax implies, Tecmessa describes the violent events of the night as “an experience tantamount to death” (θανάτω . . . ἴσον πάθος, 215). She imitates aspects of ritual lament in her response to Ajax’s misfortune, particularly through her repeated emotional rhetorical questions, as she describes what she has witnessed to the Chorus. Casey Dué argues that by “lamenting in this way in anticipation of Ajax’s death, [Tecmessa] initiates the mourning that is the desired response of Sophocles’ audience and may even foreshadow Ajax’s suicide.”¹⁷ Reacting to the news of the ritualized sacrifice that occurs before the play even begins, the Chorus too predicts that Ajax will die (229–30).

Beyond the suicidal thoughts of Ajax and the fears of his *philoí*, the aftermath of the sacrifice of the herds suggests a bolder interpretation of Ajax’s postritual status. These scenes do not merely suggest that Ajax is about to die but actually describe him in terms most appropriate for a man who is already dead. Three times in the course of part I, he is described using the verb κείμει or the related προκείμει. While both verbs have a broad semantic field, in each of these three cases the strongest resonance is a ritual one, that of a body prostrate in death and awaiting burial in the Greek custom of *prothesis*.¹⁸ At 205–7 Tecmessa describes how “now the great, terrible, and savage Ajax lies in a turbid storm of sickness” (νῦν γὰρ ὁ δεινὸς μέγας ὠμοκρατῆς / Αἴας θολερῶ / κεῖται χειμῶνι νοσήσας); at line 323 she uses the same verb to much same effect. Ajax himself uses this verb to describe how he lies in a state of dishonor (τανῦν δ’ ἄτι- / μοις ὥδε πρόκειμαι, 426–27). A single occurrence of this verb might not warrant any attention, but, as with the σφάζω language in this part of the play, the repetition of κείμει and its compounds strengthens the ritual overtones associated with this vocabulary.¹⁹

Other aspects of this part of the play contribute to the impression of a *prothesis* played out on the stage. Tecmessa is cast in the role of grieving wife from her first appearance in the play, likening herself to a grieving relative by her use of the verb κηδομαι when she includes herself among “those who care for the far-off household of Telamon” (οἱ κηδόμενοι / τοῦ Τελαμῶνος τηλόθεν οἴκου, 203–4).²⁰ As was

customary during the *prothesis*, Tecmessa stays close by her husband's side. Her gestures of supplication toward Ajax imitate the way in which close family members reached out to the hands or the head of the deceased at the *prothesis*.²¹ The Chorus also reinforces the idea of a funeral in the threnodic quality of the first *stasimon*.²² It complains that Ajax's actions have caused the Chorus to mourn (614–15), describing its grief as πένθος, a word usually associated with lament for the dead.²³ The Chorus also dramatizes the hypothetical but very realistic mourning of Ajax's mother, Eriboia, describing her lamenting, striking her breast, and tearing at her hair, all conventional signs of grief for the dead (624–33). Taken together, all these signals conflate the final stage of what is initially ritualized as sacrifice with elements of funerary ritual.

Both of the rituals implicit in part I of the play—sacrifice and funeral—bestow conflicting ritual roles on Ajax, which helps to convey his problematic relationship with those around him. Insofar as the slaughter of the herds is described as a sacrifice, he is imbued with the characteristics of both officiant and victim. While there is no question that he wielded the knife and embraced the role of sacrificer, he is also assimilated to the animals he slaughtered. Both William Stanford and Alexander Garvie note the etymological play likening Ajax's body to the corpses of the rams he has killed, when Tecmessa describes him as “sitting fallen among the fallen corpses of gory rams” (ἐν δ' ἐρείπιοις / νεκρῶν ἐρειφθεῖς ἔζετ' ἄρνειον φόνου, 308–9).²⁴ The concubine also describes his laments as the groans of a bellowing bull (322), again comparing man and slaughtered beast.²⁵ Even Ajax blurs the boundary between himself and his victims. At line 361 he asks the Chorus to slaughter him with the rest of the livestock. He also uses the same verb to describe Athena's infliction of madness upon him (αἰκίζει, 403) that other characters use to describe his tormenting of the animals, again conflating man and beasts.²⁶ Insofar as Ajax's actions are described as sacrificial, he paradoxically takes on the characteristics of both the officiant and, in the aftermath, the victim.

Similarly paradoxical roles are assigned to Ajax through the funereal language of the opening scenes of the play. As we have already seen, this language casts him in the role of corpse, the focus of the mourning of others. At the same time, he is portrayed as one of his own most ardent mourners. Tecmessa describes his reaction upon realizing that he has killed rams in place of his enemies, tearing at his hair with his nails in a traditional gesture of grief (310) and wailing mournful laments (ἐξὼμωξεν οἰμωγὰς λυγρὰς, 317).²⁷ Further, she tells the Chorus that Ajax is no longer accepting food or drink (324), which is reminiscent of the archetypal mourning of Achilles for Patroclus in the *Iliad*.²⁸

The conflation of two kinds of ritual and the conflated roles that Ajax adopts in each of them in these early scenes richly convey his inability to integrate into

any community in the postliminal phase of the play's first major ritualized action. His sacrificial violence horrifies those around him rather than creating community, and the intensity of his mourning makes him insensible to the shared grief of his *philoi*. Rather than serving its usual community-building function, lament allows Ajax to avoid engaging with others.²⁹ But if his roles as officiant and mourner prevent him from connecting with those around him, the complementary roles of victim and corpse emphasize his isolation even more forcefully. Ajax is likened to a victim who never reaches the gods because of the corruption of the sacrificial act. He is also likened to a dead person who fails to migrate to the underworld; it is clear that his *philoi* cannot follow through with an actual funeral while he is still literally alive. Ajax cannot resume his place in the communities he has lost through his polluted ritual actions, but neither does this ritual facilitate his integration into any other kind of community.

The conflation of sacrifice and funerary ritual in this scene helps to generate a nuanced picture of Ajax's complete isolation, one that is more comprehensive and more persuasive than could be conveyed by either ritual alone. In particular the addition of funerary imagery is crucial for reinforcing his passive victimhood in this scene. The role of sacrificial officiant wielding the sword is easily applied to this quintessential warrior. However, the role of victim is more difficult to ascribe to him, especially since sacrificial victims are usually animal, not human. By contrast, the passive role of corpse is more easily applied to Ajax, since this ritual role is commonplace in the myths of even the greatest and most violent Greek heroes. By describing Ajax using more than one kind of ritual symbolism, the complexity of his postritual status and the complete isolation in which he exists are effectively conveyed.

Since this is only the first ritualized action described in the play, it is not yet possible to consider the conflation of any of these ritual elements with the later ritual content. Even at this early juncture, however, the internal ritual conflation of this scene confronts the audience with a powerful symbolic representation of Ajax's hugely problematic ritual status and lays the groundwork for future conflation with the rituals yet to come as the plot develops. As the play moves on to part II and a new ritual focus, the details that characterize the failed postliminal phase of the central ritualized action in part I strongly convey Ajax's extreme isolation without offering any suggestion as to how that isolation might be overcome.

Part II—The Sacrificial Suicide

As the play shifts from part I to part II, the ritual focus shifts as well. This shift is largely accomplished through two speeches delivered by Ajax,

the first to Tecmessa and the Chorus and the second as a soliloquy. In the first speech, he proposes to perform a purification ritual to address the ritual failure of his nighttime foray, setting a new trajectory for the development of his story. His language in this speech certainly describes a purification ritual. He tells Tecmessa and the Chorus that he will go to the bathing places (λουτρά) by the seashore and, having rid himself of pollution, will ward off Athena's heavy anger (654–56). He proposes to go to an untrodden plot of land, dig a hole, and hide his sword where none will see it but Night and Hades (657–60). These details all align with standard purificatory practice: cleansing with water, particularly sea water, and hiding polluted materials in a secluded place were regularly part of purification rites.³⁰ Ajax's decision to separate from the group in order to perform the purification at the seashore is, therefore, not immediately cause for suspicion, despite what the audience likely already knew about his myth.³¹ For his *philoī*, this declaration must suggest that the hero wishes to restore his relationship with the audience and with the rest of the Greek forces. This assumption is not only supported by Ajax's own words about his apparent intentions but also conforms with Greek religious logic, which understood purity and group belonging to be closely connected.³² The proposal of purification, therefore, is a completely reasonable response to the situation Ajax finds himself in. His speech to his *philoī* declaring his intentions can be construed as the first step in the preliminary ritual phase that, the audience must assume, will play out offstage.

In light of Ajax's subsequent suicide, it is tempting to read these words in retrospect as a "deception speech," as they have so often been labeled. There are certainly elements in this speech that can be read as foreshadowing his suicide. Krummen identifies Ajax's proposal to go to the seashore (παρακτίους / λειμῶνας, 654–55) with the shores of the underworld, suggesting that his words evoke a funeral as much as a purification.³³ Along the same lines, many have linked the purifying *loutra* Ajax mentions with funeral libations and have interpreted the burial of the sword as an open reference to his imminent suicide.³⁴ Moreover, with hindsight, his friends and family conclude that they have been misled by him. As Tecmessa later laments, "I know that I have been deceived by the man" (ἐγνώκα γὰρ δὴ φῶτός ἡπατημένη, 807). In the moment, however, since Ajax's language is so ambiguous, it cannot be concluded definitively that he does not intend to perform some kind of purification, whatever else he may intend to do. To determine whether he deceives, and, if so, whether he deceives deliberately or unconsciously, demands a kind of insight into the inner workings of the mind of a dramatic character that simply cannot be achieved from the script alone. This is not the place to discuss at length the genuine or deceptive nature of Ajax's speech.³⁵ It simply bears repeating that, whatever else he may intend, nothing in his language

at this point precludes the possibility that he does indeed intend to perform a purification.

After a brief intervening messenger scene containing a report of the prophecy that Ajax will be brought low if he leaves his tent (748–57), an extraordinary thing happens: the Chorus leaves the stage along with Tecmessa and the messenger to search for Ajax.³⁶ P. J. Finglass remarks that this has a strong closural effect. In one sense it does because it mimics the departure of the Chorus that occurs at the end of all tragedies.³⁷ However, it is far too early in the dramatic action for the exit of the Chorus to suggest to the audience that the play is over. Instead, I suggest that the departure is preliminary rather than closural, facilitating Ajax's separation from the group in preparation for the liminal phase of the ritual that the audience will now witness. Ajax's total isolation in the middle of the play, something not normally permitted by tragic convention, visually emphasizes his isolation in anticipation of his coming ritual transition. This segregation creates the "subjunctive" or "time out of time" quality that characterizes van Gennep's second ritual phase and Turner's *communitas*.³⁸ It signals to the audience that it is about to witness the fulfillment or disappointment of the ritual expectations that Ajax has raised in his speech to Tecmessa and the Chorus, without giving any clear indication of which of these options is more likely.

The text of the play does not reveal explicitly whether Ajax performs his proposed purification before returning to the stage, although the ancient audience would have known immediately by the state, bloodied or clean, of his clothing. On the basis of what can be gleaned from the text, I propose that he returns without having performed this ritual. It is highly unlikely, in a genre that relies so heavily on words to convey matters of plot and stage direction, that Ajax would complete one ritual offstage (purification) and initiate another (ultimately his own sacrificial suicide) without mentioning this to the audience himself or without the playwright's filling in the narrative gap with a messenger speech. When Ajax appears onstage, the audience will expect him either to fulfill or to report on the ritual promises he made before leaving. Since no such explanation is forthcoming, it is most likely that he has not yet performed any kind of purification ritual. Whatever ritual actions he has performed preliminary to his reappearance onstage are not revealed to the audience.

As a result, the best reading of Ajax's solo scene construes his reappearance onstage and the suicide soliloquy as the ritual sequence to his promises of purification before his departure rather than a completely new ritual. This reading is borne out by the speech that follows. Ajax's suicide soliloquy picks up on the same themes that characterize his earlier speech. In particular, both orations engage with the theme of alternation and cyclical change, stressing that friends may become

enemies and vice versa (678–83 vs. 815–22). This complementarity encourages the audience to see the suicide soliloquy as extending consideration of the issues raised in Ajax's earlier speech rather than as the beginning of a new ritual sequence.

The first word that Ajax utters upon returning to the stage alone is *σφαγεύς* (815), a word that, as we have seen, has strong sacrificial overtones. The audience need not immediately take this to mean that he will not perform a purification in the scene that follows. In fact, sacrifice was not only a common first step to purification in ancient Greece but was, in some ways, difficult to distinguish entirely from purification, both in its ritual components and in its aims.³⁹ Ajax could certainly be referring to an imminent cathartic sacrifice. The audience may already have something of the sort in mind, just as the Chorus in the second *stasimon* immediately following his speech imagines that the hero will perform sacrifices to propitiate the gods after he leaves the stage (708–13).

In the words that follow the initial *σφαγεύς*, however, it becomes obvious that Ajax intends to kill himself rather than sacrifice another victim to atone for his earlier ritual actions. His proposed purification, therefore, of which nothing more is shown or described, becomes conflated with sacrificial ritual. In spite of the ritual irregularities of Ajax's subsequent actions, the scene unambiguously embraces elements of sacrifice ritual, as *σφαγεύς* presages.⁴⁰ Martin Sicherl shows that the careful sharpening and placement of the sword as well as the entreating tone of Ajax's speech addressed to the gods are typical elements of sacrificial ritual.⁴¹ In addition to the sword's epithet of *σφαγεύς*, Ajax declares himself to be an *αὐτοσφαγής* (841),⁴² and Tecmessa confirms the ritual nature of his death when, upon discovering the body, she echoes the language of a scene she has not witnessed. She describes Ajax's corpse as *νεοσφαγής* (898) and his actions as *οἰκεία σφαγή* (919). The repetition of *σφάζω* language, just as in part I of the play, strongly suggests the ritual character of Ajax's actions. Indeed, Jacques Jouanna cites Ajax's suicide as the only exception to the rule that sacrifice does not take place onstage in Greek tragedy.⁴³

Both of the rituals evoked by Ajax's words and actions in part II of the play—purification and sacrifice—have his sword at their center. The essential ritual action of the purification that he proposes to his *philoí* is the burial of his sword (658–60), an action that turns out to be synonymous with the act of self-sacrifice that he goes on to perform as he buries the sword first in the earth and then in his own body (819–22, 826–28). The prominence of the sword in both rituals not only intensifies their conflation but also contributes to the poetic effect that this conflation has on the audience's perception of Ajax. Through the sword, his paradoxical role in this internally conflated ritual and his failure to achieve community through it are emphasized. This happens, in particular, because of the ambiguous qualities with which the sword is endowed.

Ajax himself describes the sword in ambivalent terms. In his first major speech, he seems, at least on the surface, to have been persuaded by the negative views of those around him. He proposes to hide the sword, the most hateful of weapons (ἔχθιστον βελῶν, 658), by burying it in the ground. The sword also becomes a metaphor for his own weakness of character: namely, his inflexibility. “For I, who used to be terribly strong,” he says, “as when iron is dipped, have had my tongue softened by this woman” (κάγῳ γάρ, ὅς τὰ δειν’ ἐκαρτέρουν τότε, / βαφῇ σίδηρος ὤς, ἐθελύνθην στόμα / πρὸς τῇσδε τῆς γυναικός, 650–52). Ultimately this sword, a gift from an enemy, is no gift at all (ἄδωρα δῶρα, 665) and symbolizes a failure of the heroic code of reciprocity.⁴⁴

In spite of these negative associations in the early lines of part II, Ajax in his final scene in the play reclaims the sword as an implement of last resort for restoring valor and status. Although he has already relinquished his shield to his son, giving up the symbol of his former heroic identity, he seizes on the sword as a means of forging a new identity for himself in desperate circumstances.⁴⁵ In his suicide speech the sword, no longer ἔχθιστον βελῶν, is suddenly “most friendly” (εὐνούστατον, 822) because it allows him to escape the disgrace of his situation with dignity. Ajax has no illusions that death by sword will guarantee his restoration in the eyes of the Greek army. In fact, he is worried that they will cast his corpse out for the dogs and the birds (829–30). Neither does he believe that it will be a quick or painless death, as he prays to Hermes to ease his death struggles (831–34). Nonetheless, the sword represents his last remaining means of exerting control over his own life. The sword fixed in the ground is the last fixed thing in the unstable world in which he finds himself.⁴⁶

The dual nature of the sword as expressed in Ajax’s “deception speech” and suicide soliloquy reflects the dual roles that he takes on in the ritual actions of this section of the play. Many commentators have noted the difficulty of determining what exactly Ajax does in this scene, since, just as in part I, he seems to adopt incompatible ritual roles.⁴⁷ On the one hand, he is the active agent in this ritual, directing the attempt at a purifying sacrifice; Ajax himself performs all the preparations for his ritual action (sharpening and positioning his sword, as he describes at 815–22) and claims his own agency in the ritual by labeling himself an αὐτοσφαγῆς (841).⁴⁸ On the other hand, he is the passive purifying scapegoat and sacrificial victim; the sword, not Ajax, is given agency through the title of σφαγεύς (815), and Ajax does not wield the sword himself or deliver the killing blow.⁴⁹ Tecmessa underscores this role confusion in the words she uses when she discovers his body. She describes his death as both active (the violence was Ajax’s own, οἰκεία σφαγή, 919) and passive (he is “newly slain,” νεοσφαγῆς, 898).⁵⁰ The sword, with its own ambiguous connotations, is the focal point for his confusion of roles, since, in his

act of purifying suicide, Ajax and his sword become a single entity. The confusion of actor and object is reinforced by his use of the plural at 823 (εὐσκευοῦμεν).⁵¹ The centrality of the sword in part II amplifies the ambiguity of Ajax's conflated purification-sacrifice and his conflicting roles in these ritual actions.

The ritual signals conveyed in part II are reinforced by their conflation with ritual elements from part I. The ritual violence that Ajax now turns against himself is conflated with the violence he earlier directed against the herds by many similarities between these two scenes.⁵² His physical isolation on the seashore just before killing himself echoes the social isolation he experiences in part I, in the midst of friends and family but unable to communicate with these supporters in any meaningful way. That inability to communicate with them becomes literal on the lonely beach in part II. Moreover, the repetitive use of the language of σφάζω in both scenes encourages the audience to see Ajax's suicide as corrupt ritual violence of the same kind as the corrupt ritual violence he directed against animals in part I.

Most overtly, the sword, which is so prominent in part II, makes obvious reference to its own role in part I. Nearly all who comment on the *Ajax* point out that the two sacrificial scenes are linked by the repetition of the very specific description of the bloody sword, both times modified by the same adjective, both times in the dative case, and both times in emphatic position at the end of the line. The sword that slaughters the herds and the sword on which Ajax falls are described in each scenario as "a sword dripping with fresh gore" (νεορράντῳ ξίφει, 30, 828).⁵³ More subtly, the ambiguous nature of the sword in part II is reinforced by its similar ambiguity in part I. In this early part of the play, all the other characters who appear onstage view Ajax's sword as an unequivocally negative symbol linked to the hero's corrupt violence. Athena (10), Odysseus (30), the Chorus (230–32), and Tecmessa (286–87) all focus on the sword in describing Ajax's actions and, particularly, their terrible aftermath. By contrast, the sword is to Ajax not an overt symbol of crime or disgrace but to some extent a badge of honor. He proudly defends what he has accomplished with the sword to Athena; when she asks him if he has stained his sword in the blood of the Argive army, he responds, "It is possible to boast, I will not deny it" (ἔβαψας ἔχγος εὖ πρὸς Ἀργείων στρατῷ; / κόμπος πάρεστι κοῦκ ἀπαρνοῦμαι τὸ μὴ, 95–96). Even after he emerges from his madness and recognizes the extent of his disgrace, he is unwilling to relinquish the sword, even to his son (574–77). For Ajax, the sword still represents a tool by which he can mitigate his disgrace.

Like the sacrifice Ajax accomplished with the sword before the play's beginning, the act of sacrifice committed using the sword in part II is marred by corruption. Once more, the fundamental problem in the ritual is the role Ajax plays in it.

We have already seen in part I that he is described, paradoxically, as both sacrificial officiant and victim and as both mourner and corpse. His failure to integrate into the community of his friends and family is expressed by his inability to settle into just one ritual role. The conflation of his suicide ritual with the sacrifice of the herds through the prominence of the sword in both rituals imports these implications from part I into part II. Indeed, the reappearance of the sword in the play's second major ritual sequence magnifies the paradoxical implications of Ajax's participation in the ritual. Whereas before the sword facilitated his adoption of roles that were merely figuratively paradoxical, here the sword, which allows Ajax both to kill himself and to avoid delivering the killing blow, facilitates his adoption of ritual roles that are now literally paradoxical. By confusing the normally and necessarily separate roles of officiant and victim, Ajax fails at both. He cannot be simultaneously a gift for the gods and the recipient of purification from the gods, as the sword's role in the ritual implies, and so, ultimately, he is neither.

As the audience has already seen, the last time Ajax was cast in conflicting ritual roles it was an indication of his complete isolation and the failure of his initial act of sacrifice to reintegrate him into the Greek community. His most recent ritual actions are the tragic result of that failure of reintegration. When Ajax refers to his sword with the words νεοπρᾶντῳ ξίφει, therefore, the use of this phrase reminds the audience of the fallout from the previous ritual and suggests that the fallout from Ajax's ritualized suicide will be the same. In particular, the other characters' horrified reaction to the slaughter of the herds both anticipates and later reinforces their and, indeed, the audience's horrified reaction to the violence Ajax commits against himself in part II. The conflation of these two corrupt rituals suggests that the events following Ajax's suicide will be marred by similar problems vis-à-vis Ajax's relationship with his *philoi* and with the Greek community more broadly.

This foreshadowing is important because unlike part I, part II spends almost no time on the third phase of the ritual progression. Having largely relegated the preliminary phases of the ritualized suicide to the wings and having emphasized the liminal phase of the ritual through Ajax's unusual presence onstage alone, this play abbreviates the postliminal phase almost to the point of nonexistence. All the audience is permitted to witness of the ritualized suicide is the moment in which Ajax makes the transition from life to death. Almost as soon as he falls on his sword, the atmosphere of liminal isolation is broken and the ritual arc is truncated when Ajax's *philoi* discover the body. Having been excluded from participation in the corrupt and unfamiliar ritual of his death, his friends are unable to complete its final phase on his behalf and, as before, are at a loss as to how to help him reintegrate. The goals of Ajax's ritual actions, therefore, remain unachieved, and the ritual, at least so far as the audience is shown, remains incomplete.

In the context of the play as a whole, the audience has now witnessed the post-liminal phase of the play's first ritual and the liminal phase of the play's second ritual. While it is likely too soon for the audience to detect any larger pattern, much less a backward rite of passage,⁵⁴ the ongoing lack of ritual closure offered by the play's rituals is certainly discernible in a less defined way. Ajax's inability to find a secure place in a community by ritual means is reinforced by the cumulative effect of the play's unresolved rituals. It is clear even to the casual observer that the play's second main ritual achieves less closure than the first. Any hope for the resolution that the rituals of parts I and II were unable to deliver is now displaced onto the rituals surrounding the treatment of Ajax's body—the only ritual mechanism remaining for his friends and family to attempt to integrate him into a community. His status now depends not on his own actions but on how others choose to treat his corpse, and this suggests at least the possibility of a solution to the impasse to which his ritual actions have brought the play.

Part III—Burial and Beyond

Tecmessa's words upon discovering Ajax's body provide a smooth transition from the ritual concerns of parts I and II to those of part III. When she discovers the body, she declares to the Chorus, "This is our Ajax, who lies just now slaughtered, enfolded upon the sword hidden inside him" (Αἶας ὃδ' ἡμῖν ἀρτίως νεοσφαγῆς / κεῖται, κρυφαίῳ φασγάνῳ περιπτυχῆς, 898–99). The vocabulary of this statement makes reference to two rituals with which the play has been concerned so far: sacrifice (νεοσφαγῆς) and funeral (κεῖται). The word νεοσφαγῆς, at the end of Tecmessa's first line, leads logically to κεῖται at the beginning of the second, Ajax's success in sacrificing himself finally necessitating the funeral that he alluded to broadly in parts I and II. While the funeral imagery in part I was figurative, now, for the first time, the consequences of Ajax's very literal act of sacrifice require an actual burial. Tecmessa becomes the κηδομένη she imagined herself to be at 203–4 and so fulfills the ritual expectations that her use of κηδομαι created much earlier in the play.⁵⁵ The hero's *prothesis*, to which the verb κείμαι refers here and later in part III (988–89, 1306–7, 1309), now literally takes place on the stage, confirming in retrospect the funereal implications of the proleptic use of κείμαι in part I. The laments uttered by Tecmessa and the Chorus from this point forward reinforce the funereal atmosphere.

Despite the presence of a body and the obvious need for funerary ritual, Tecmessa and Teucer are unable to bring themselves to perform the rites immediately. She proves incapable of even looking at Ajax's ruined body, insisting that he

be covered with her cloak and concealed from his friends' view (915–16). Far from providing Ajax with a shroud as the word *φῆρος* suggests and as the funerary *prothesis* required,⁵⁶ Tecmessa puts off the funeral by distancing herself from the body. A few lines later Teucer arrives to help perform the necessary ritual actions for his brother, to *συγκαθαρμόσαι* (922), a normal role for close male kin.⁵⁷ Upon uncovering the body, however, Teucer is struck by the same *aporia* as Tecmessa, his indecision reflected in the rhetorical questions he asks: “Alas, what shall I do? How will I draw you from this sharp, gleaming sword?” (οἶμοι, τί δράσω; πῶς σ’ ἀποσπάσω πικροῦ / τοῦδ’ αἰόλου κνώδοντος; 1024–25). As the play progresses, he never manages to remove the sword from Ajax’s body: his original hesitation is never completely overcome within the bounds of the play.⁵⁸

This initial scene in part III shows in miniature what will become the central narrative focus of the remainder of the play. Ajax’s burial is continually delayed and thwarted even though circumstances dictate that his ritual condition must be addressed with a proper burial. The major opposition to the burial comes, of course, from the Atreidae, who are not so much concerned with Ajax’s ritual condition as with his earlier attempted crimes. Menelaus and Agamemnon represent obstacles to the proper ritual treatment of Ajax’s body, their lack of concern for ritual matters evident in the near absence of ritual content in their respective scenes. In spite of this, their presence in the play nonetheless reinforces the audience’s sense of Ajax’s problematic ritual status, since their refusal to allow the hero’s burial reflects his failure to reintegrate into the Greek community despite his desperate ritualized efforts. In particular, Menelaus’ fixation on Ajax’s original crime of sacrificial slaughter (1052–65) emphasizes the fact that his current ritual problems stem from his earlier ritual actions. Between the initial *aporia* of Ajax’s *philoî* and the outright obstruction of his enemies, part III shows characters stuck in the preliminary stages of the funerary ritual, unable to proceed to the funeral itself.

In the face of these constant delays, the Chorus continually reminds the audience of the need to give Ajax ritual attention. Immediately preceding and following Menelaus’ appearance, it urges Teucer to accomplish the burial before the hero’s enemies can prevent it (1040–43, 1163–67). The words of the Chorus following Menelaus’ departure prompt Teucer to perform one of the most extraordinary rituals in the play. The silent figures of Tecmessa and Eurysaces gather at the body (1168–69); Eurysaces is instructed by Teucer to dedicate three locks of hair (his own, his mother’s, and Teucer’s) in supplication (1170–75); and Teucer utters a curse against those who would violate that suppliance (1175–79) and proposes that he begin digging the grave (1183–84). Although elements of three kinds of ritual—curse, supplication, and burial—are discernible here and can be analyzed as

three independent ritual gestures, they are presented in this scene as part of the same ritual sequence and therefore, just like the rituals in parts I and II, present a conflated ritual to the audience.

The ritual is most obviously conflated because the locks of hair that Eurysaces dedicates at the site of the body serve three simultaneous functions, which imply three different kinds of ritual. First, they are offered as a guarantee of the efficacy of Teucer's curse; second, they act as a token of the family's supplication at Ajax's body in lieu of the more standard branches; third, they represent an offering to Ajax's corpse, as was proper during the *prothesis*, in anticipation of his coming burial.⁵⁹ Teucer's ritual efforts here smack of desperation: he cobbles together a kind of ritual catch-all, as though the greater complexity of the ritual were tied to greater chances of success. However, rather than facilitating the integration of Ajax into any community, this strange conflated ritual emphasizes his problematic ritual status, unable to rejoin any of the groups to which he formerly belonged and unable to proceed to the world of the dead.

Just like the conflated rituals presented in parts I and II, this conflated ritual highlights the conflicted and ambiguous nature of Ajax himself. The conflation of so many different kinds of ritual conveys not merely the hero's marginalization but especially the formidable difficulties facing those who wish to help him overcome it now that he is dead. Taken together, the three components of Teucer's ritual offer the contradictory suggestion that Ajax is both in need of protection and, at the same time, a source of protection, as many scholars have noted.⁶⁰ These ritual components are, in part, intended to keep Eurysaces and Tecmessa safe, relying on Ajax's body as a protective talisman against the violence of enemies and drawing on his identity as a hero of awesome ability. However, paradoxically, the ultimate goal of the ritual is to facilitate the preliminaries to his eventual burial, which is aimed entirely at protecting Ajax himself from the very forces from which he is supposed to shield his family. In this way the ritual reflects Ajax's weaknesses and, above all, his inability to assert his will against that of the Greek army and especially the Atreidae. The inconsistent suggestion that he is somehow both protecting his family and, at the same time, being protected by them echoes the character of the conflated rituals in parts I and II. Yet again Ajax is portrayed as both agent and object in the same ritual. The continued presence onstage of the ambiguous sword embedded in Ajax's body offers a tangible reminder of these earlier rituals. As with the roles of officiant and victim conferred on Ajax through the ritual language of parts I and II, the hero cannot logically embrace the roles of both protector and dependent in part III. As before, the intended outcome of the ritual, it is suggested, is unlikely to be forthcoming in light of the problematic and

conflicted identity of its chief participant. The remainder of the play bears out this suggestion.⁶¹

In addition to the poetic effects created by the internal conflation of Teucer's ritual, the individual elements of this ritual are conflated across the play, importing into this scene the implications of rituals that the audience has already witnessed in parts I and II. Take, for example, the suppliant components in this scene. According to Naiden's analysis, the supplication begins at line 1171 with Eurysaces as the suppliant and Ajax as the *supplicandus*, and it ends at line 1373 when Agamemnon gives permission for the body to be buried.⁶² This analysis of the ritual is problematic because if Ajax is indeed to be identified as the *supplicandus*, it should be he who answers the suppliant request. However, Ajax's role in the later scene is only implicit; if anything, it is closer to that of suppliant, while Agamemnon, with his authority to agree to the funeral, better fits the role of *supplicandus*. Naiden runs up against the problem I have already identified: Ajax's contradictory roles in this ritual scene. His brief analysis of this supplication does not account for its complexity.

Rather than imagining this act of supplication to stretch over more than two hundred lines with two *agones* intervening between the request and its fulfillment, the ritual makes better sense if understood as confined to this scene spanning only lines 1168 to 1184. From this perspective, the ritual supplication remains incomplete. The audience's understanding of the implications of this ritual, therefore, cannot be based on the ritual's outcome. Instead, in addition to the suggestion that Ajax remains a ritually isolated and ambiguous character, as the conflated nature of the ritual conveys, the audience's perceptions of the ritual are in part determined by implicit parallels between this supplication and references to supplication from earlier in the play. As we have already seen, Tecmessa twice supplicates Ajax in part I. The first time she pleads with him not to abandon her to his enemies through his own death (492–95), but he offers no response. In hindsight, the audience now knows that Ajax has done the exact opposite of what Tecmessa requested. In her second attempt (587–90), she begs him to show mercy not only for her sake but also that of Eurysaces, whom she brings before his father, and that of the gods. This time Ajax acknowledges the request, but his response is no less dismissive. He tells her to stop bothering him and declares that he owes the gods nothing. In part III the tableau on stage references this earlier scene as Tecmessa and Eurysaces once more beseech a prone and taciturn Ajax. The same ritual language is also repeated (ἰκνοῦμαι, 588, vs. ἰκέτης, 1172, ἰκτήριον, 1175).

Both earlier instances of supplication subtly encourage the audience to expect that this newest request at the corpse of Ajax will also be ignored or refused,

though the play never answers the question one way or the other. While Tecmessa and Eurysaces' suppliance has not been violated by the end of the play, the preparations for Ajax's funeral mean that the site of their supplication beside his corpse will no longer be available to them. Moreover, Agamemnon's concession on the subject of burial, though it offers the promise of resolution for Ajax, in no way guarantees the future safety of Ajax's dependents. With no clear resolution on the subject of Tecmessa and Eurysaces' supplication, the audience's expectations will be influenced by the failure of the play's earlier acts of supplication, whose outcome was unequivocally negative.

The references to burial and funeral rites in Teucer's ritual also evoke earlier moments in the play. Of course, most recently in the audience's experience, these elements refer to the ongoing delays in obtaining burial for Ajax. However, these ritual components are also conflated with aspects of the ritual described in part II, and so they import the ritual connotations of that scene into part III. The audience will recall that Ajax had promised to bury his sword in the earth (658–59), implying that this would be an act of ritual purification removing the source of his disgrace and pollution. While he ultimately does bury the sword, it is not in the manner that he promised, nor does it have the ritual effect he implies it will. Burying the sword first in the ground (821–22), he then buries it in his own body, as he anticipates at 827–28. In turn, this act of violent burial recalls the ritual violence of the slaughter of the herds in part I. The connection between these various parts of the play is not accomplished through language. In part II the act of burial is divided into its component parts, digging and hiding (658, κρύψω; 659, ὀρύξας), while in this scene and elsewhere in part III, the act of burial is consistently referred to by θάπτω, its compounds, and the related τάφος.⁶³ The parallels are still clear, however, especially since the offending sword is still present onstage. Since, before, Ajax's promises of burial were fulfilled in a ritually corrupt way, the audience's expectations for the promised burial here and throughout part III should be correspondingly negative. The lingering associations of Ajax's suicide and the slaughter of the herds prevent the audience from anticipating his burial without apprehension.

The final ritual element in this scene, the curse, is more difficult to assess.⁶⁴ By the time Teucer utters this curse against the unidentified person who might attempt to drag Eurysaces away from Ajax's body, the audience has already heard Ajax's curse uttered against the Atreidae (835–44) but have no way of evaluating the efficacy of this request of the gods. Teucer's curse in this scene remains similarly untested in the play, though he reinforces it with another curse, this time specifically directed against the Atreidae as the play draws to its close (1389–92). In the absence of any ritual precedents to suggest whether these curses will be effective, the audience's expectations will likely depend on two things: whether Ajax has maintained

a healthy reciprocal relationship with the gods, and whether the audience perceives him to have been wronged by stronger opponents.⁶⁵ Given Athena's role in this play and, in particular, her anger over Ajax's refusal to accept her help in previous battles (762–77), the curse will seem likely to fail. As for Ajax's enemies, the case is more difficult to judge. Ajax himself certainly believes that he has been wronged by stronger opponents in the sense that the Atreidae are higher in the Greek chain of command and therefore able to use their authority to treat him unjustly. By contrast, his turn to violence to address this injustice, and the fact that a goddess must intervene to stop him from taking his violent revenge, belie the apparent weakness of his position. On balance, the curse seems more likely to fail than to succeed, which is in keeping with the problems affecting other aspects of the conflated ritual of which this curse is one component.

The lack of resolution offered by Teucer's ritual is compounded by the fact that it is described so briefly and ends so abruptly. Immediately afterward, a short choral interlude about the lost pleasures of peace and home provides a stark contrast; Teucer then rushes back onstage to confront the unexpected arrival of Agamemnon (1223–24). The Greek commander, like his brother before him, attacks both Teucer and Ajax as traitors to the army. While Agamemnon's speech does not address ritual issues at all, Teucer's response introduces the language of *prothesis* in reaction to Agamemnon's opposition to the burial. "Would I dishonor one of my own blood," he asks, "whom you now push away as he lies unburied in troubles like these?" (ἄν αἰσχύνοιμι τοὺς πρὸς αἵματος, / οὗς νῦν σὺ τοιοῖσδ' ἐν πόνοις κειμένους / ὠθεῖς ἀθάπτους, 1305–7). His use of κείμαι evokes numerous occurrences of this verb earlier in the play, each one stressing Ajax's problematic ritual status, while ἀθάπτους emphasizes the ritual problem specific to part III. This language, in conjunction with the obvious presence of Ajax's corpse on the stage, creates a sense of urgency surrounding his funeral that Agamemnon and even Teucer appear not to feel as they indulge in a lengthy rhetorical display. The frustrated audience will have the sense that this argument could continue indefinitely but for the arrival, at last, of Odysseus.

Like the Chorus's speeches earlier in part III, Odysseus' arrival onstage draws the plot back to the question of what is to be done with Ajax's body. His intervention is absolutely necessary for the drama to move forward, since Agamemnon, unwilling to relinquish his enmity for Ajax in spite of Odysseus' persuasive words, is persuaded to allow the burial to proceed only when Odysseus agrees to accept all responsibility for it (1367–69). After thanking Odysseus, Teucer asks him to refrain from direct participation in the funeral—that is, any direct contact with the corpse⁶⁶—but he invites Odysseus and the rest of the Greek army to witness the burial.

It is certainly possible that Odysseus is not the selfless voice of compassion that he appears to be at this juncture. Malcolm Heath and Eleanor O’Kell propose that he may be using his mediating role as a vehicle for some more sophisticated deception, a possibility that would have been confirmed or disproven by the plays performed immediately following the *Ajax*, if indeed it was part of a linked trilogy.⁶⁷ Even if the audience does not doubt Odysseus’ benevolent motives at this point, the inclusion of the rest of the Greek forces is an open invitation to trouble, since at their last mention they were, as a collective, threatening to stone Teucer to death solely on the basis of his kinship with Ajax (723–28). The immediate effect of Odysseus’ intervention with Agamemnon is that Teucer is able to return to the preparations for Ajax’s funeral, setting in motion the final phase of the story told in this play. But the satisfaction of achieving the goal that Teucer has been pursuing since the discovery of Ajax’s body is somewhat lessened by the inclusion of Odysseus and the army, an ominous detail reinforced by further ominous details in Teucer’s description of the ritual he plans to enact.

As the play draws to a close, Teucer commands the Chorus and Eurysaces to perform four related ritual actions. These are all definitively funereal in character, which is unusual in a play that has displayed so many conflated rituals throughout. In and of themselves, Teucer’s instructions are not problematic and suit the ritual need they seek to address. However, the details of this projected funeral are conflated across the play with elements of other rituals that have already been staged or described. It is by association with these previous corrupt and unsuccessful rituals that the projected resolution promised by Ajax’s burial is undermined.

Teucer’s first command is for the Chorus to dig a trench (1403–4), confirming that he has been unable to accomplish even this much in the 400 lines since the discovery of Ajax’s body. The skeptical spectator will recognize that he has been on the point of digging the grave before. On those occasions the expectations he raised were always disappointed, as, for example, when he leaves the stage at line 1184 after coordinating the hybrid ritual over Ajax’s body. Moreover, the tension associated with the constant thwarting of the burial is compounded by the problematic presentation of the act of burying earlier in the play. The very idea of burial is tainted by conflation with the polluting acts of burial that Ajax himself has already performed in part II. The burial of the sword in his body in particular undermines the reintegrative and cathartic effects that Teucer expects from this ritual. Ajax promised to accomplish the same through the burial of his sword, and the result was a ritual catastrophe. Teucer’s first command, therefore, poses more problems than it resolves.

Teucer’s second command is for the Chorus to prepare washing water for the corpse (1404–6). His choice of words here, referring to the water as *loutra*, creates

an explicit link to the words of Ajax's "deception speech." The *loutra* promised by Ajax in part II, which turned out to be the preliminary rites for his own perverted sacrifice, are now prepared as preliminary rites for his funeral. The spectacular failure of the first *loutra* to effect purification calls the second into serious doubt.⁶⁸

The third command, that the Chorus bring Ajax's panoply, his ὑπασπίδιον κόσμον (1408), presumably so that it can be buried with him as he requested at line 577, is equally troubling. Since the audience already knows that Ajax has requested that only his shield be left with Eurysaces (574–76), ὑπασπίδιον implies all the rest of the hero's battle gear, including the sword that has proven to be the source of so much pollution. If indeed the sword is now to be made a part of this final ritual act, the audience can only assume that it will continue to exert a polluting influence on the coming ritual, as it has done in every ritual in which it has been involved so far. Teucer's indirect reference to the sword evokes both Ajax's sacrifice of the herds and his self-sacrifice, tainting the projected funeral by association. The sword's ambiguous qualities, reflecting the ambiguities of Ajax himself, suggest that ritual resolution may not be as easy as Teucer implies.

Teucer's final command is directed specifically at Eurysaces, asking the boy to help him lift the corpse in preparation for the funeral (1409–11). This resonates with the earlier ritual scene in which Teucer similarly asks the boy to touch his father's corpse in supplication. Since that supplication is imagined to be preliminary to Ajax's burial, the parallels are clear. In the previous ritual, the supplication, along with other ritual elements, strongly highlighted Ajax's problematic ritual status, an obstacle to the achievement of ritual closure. The descriptive and visual parallel presented in the *exodos* suggests that here too Teucer will struggle to resolve Ajax's indeterminate status by means of the current ritual. The uncertainty that affected the ritual presented earlier in part III affects the ritual suggestions that bring the play to a close.

The End

The *Ajax* has often been deemed problematic because of its perceived lack of unity. This venerable tradition goes all the way back to the ancient scholiast who felt that Sophocles allowed the play to continue too long after Ajax's death and, in doing so, lost tragic momentum.⁶⁹ Since then scholars have felt compelled to defend the artistic integrity of a play that continues on for more than 550 lines after its protagonist commits suicide. Like the scholiast, many of these evaluate the play as unfolding in two parts separated by Ajax's death. In defense of its unity, they argue that the hero's anticipated burial at the end of the drama represents a satisfying resolution to the issues raised in the first half, which culminates

in his suicide.⁷⁰ In this reading, the unity of the *Ajax* and the dramatic closure offered at its conclusion are closely interconnected. Ajax's projected funeral at the end of the play is both the event that ties the play's later scenes to the rest of the drama and the event that brings closure to the dramatic arc of his story.⁷¹

The movement toward burial at the end of the *Ajax* is certainly to some extent closural and cathartic. Segal rightly points out that in many tragedies, "communal ritual at the end produces a formal closure to the play and also indirectly refers to, and includes, the audience's emotional experience of release as a dimension of the closing effect."⁷² Conversely, the absence of ritual and, in particular, the absence of a necessary burial, leads to unease, as in, for example, the *Antigone*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and *Medea*.⁷³ I do not argue with Segal's comments about the cathartic properties of the proposed burial, which certainly account, in part, for the mood of the play's *exodos*. However, I do wish to challenge what has become almost a truism in scholarship on the *Ajax*: namely, the idea that while there might be other anticlosural elements and unresolved issues at the end of this play, the promise of burial ritual is uncomplicatedly cathartic and offers a secure sense of dramatic closure.

I support the *communis opinio* in some respects. Ajax's suicide is central to the plot of this play, and his funeral offers an appropriate ritual response to a need created by this earlier event. However, I would argue that any ritual analysis of the play that focuses exclusively on the "before" and "after" of this single pivotal event is not taking into account the full complexity of the ritual progression that informs the plot. A reading of the *Ajax* in two parts implies that the burial ritual responds primarily to the suicide, whereas, as I have shown, it actually takes its place in a longer, continuous ritual progression tied together via the conflation of ritual elements across the play. The anticipated funeral is not merely a response to the suicide, which takes place in what I have identified as part II; it also resonates with the rituals performed and described in both part I and earlier in part III. The best assessment of the play interprets this final scene as the end stage of a ritual progression that informs the entire plot of the *Ajax* rather than exclusively as a direct response to Ajax's death.

As we have seen, Sophocles' focus is different in each of the three main rituals that make up the plot. Part I focuses almost exclusively on what van Gennep would identify as the postliminal phase of the sacrifice of the herds. Part II emphasizes the liminal phase of Ajax's sacrificial suicide above all else. And since Ajax's burial is not accomplished on- or offstage before the play comes to a close, part III considers only the preliminary phase of his funeral. Taken together, the three main rituals in the play describe a backward rite of passage on the level of the play's superstructure. Even though the three principal segments of the *Ajax*'s plot

represent three different and distinct ritual scenes, the conflation of ritual elements from all parts of the play allows an audience to understand these three rituals as part of a single overarching progression. As a result, when Teucer sets Ajax's projected burial in motion, the otherwise normally cathartic effect of ritual is undermined, not only because of the conflation of aspects of this ritual with other problematic rituals from earlier in the play but also because this final scene represents the end phase of a larger backward ritual progression that informs the entire plot.

The assessment of the cathartic and closural effect of the burial at the end of the play is, therefore, dependent on two different progressions in the *Ajax*. This ritual is indeed closural in the sense that it offers a satisfying conclusion to the play's *narrative* progression. As Aristotle prescribes, the drama does indeed move from complication to reversal and recognition to dénouement, and burial is a perfectly logical closing move in the story that Sophocles tells here. At the same time, however, the play's *ritual* progression moves from postliminal to liminal to preliminary, reversing the order of van Gennep's rite of passage. In ritual terms, the preparations for Ajax's funeral represent a new beginning rather than an end. This chiastic movement of narrative and ritual across the play contributes to the conflicting closural and anticlosural effect of Ajax's burial in the final scene. Because the burial represents something different in each progression, in one case an end and in the other a beginning, it cannot be fully cathartic or closural. Rather than suggesting that the complexity at the end of the *Ajax* results from a clash between the closural implications of burial and the anticlosural implications of other elements in this final scene, a reading of the play guided by ritual poetics suggests that the burial in and of itself renders the *exodos* ambivalent.

I would not go so far as to argue that an audience would doubt that the hero is eventually buried. Many reasons external to the play reassure spectators that the funeral will eventually be carried out, not least of which is the fact that Ajax was worshipped as a cult hero in fifth-century Athens.⁷⁴ As Henrichs points out, by giving so much ritual attention to Ajax's corpse, Sophocles all but compels his audience to remember the historical dimension of Ajax's story and, in particular, his cult in contemporary Athens.⁷⁵ The Chorus may even hint at this future earlier in the play when it projects that Ajax will possess an "ever-remembered tomb" (ἀείμνηστον / τάφον, 1166–67). However, external cues also cast doubt on the easy resolution that Odysseus' intervention appears to offer, especially in light of the fact that Odysseus has been invited to be witness to the ritual. Perhaps most likely to occur to the audience is the scene in *Odyssey* 11 in which Ajax's ghost is the only Achaean shade who stands apart and refuses to engage with him; when the wandering hero tries to make peace with Ajax and persuade him to give up his anger, the ghost leaves without deigning to reply (11.563–64). If indeed the *Ajax* was the first

play in a connected trilogy that went on to explore the future misadventures of Teucer and Eurysaces, the audience would have learned what eventually became of Ajax's corpse and, in particular, what happened when Odysseus attended the funeral. In the dramatic moment, however, there is no way for the audience to predict specifically how the ritual will unfold. On the basis of what actually transpires in the play and the ritual implications of these events, there is no compelling reason to believe that Ajax's burial will be completed without further ritual corruption. Indeed, the conflation of ritual in this drama strongly suggests that further ritual problems are likely as the play looks ahead to a new ritual beginning.

The *Ajax* is a play that trades on false closure to create dramatic interest. Its *deus ex machina*, the appearance of Athena, comes atypically in the prologue rather than at the end of the drama. The gnomic wisdom that she offers to Odysseus immediately before she leaves the stage (127–33) is exactly the kind of statement more typically found in a play's concluding lines.⁷⁶ The Chorus leaves the stage prematurely at 814 in an *exodos* that comes before the true *exodos*. And Ajax's suicide, the death of the play's protagonist, is itself a strong ending, even though it is not the end of the story Sophocles chooses to tell.⁷⁷ The movement toward burial at the end of the play is, I argue, a similar false ending. In narrative terms, the preliminary stages of Ajax's burial represent the conclusion of the drama and the culmination of all the ritual action that has taken place so far. But in ritual terms, the preparations for the funeral are actually a new beginning. The anticipation of his funeral gestures toward the future beyond the end of this play when Ajax will eventually achieve cult hero status in Athens. But in a tragedy in which ritual has been paramount in shaping the audience's perceptions and expectations of Ajax, primarily expressing what is deeply problematic about the hero, the promise of further ritual in the *exodos* is ominous rather than soothing. For the audience who has been witness to the corrupt and conflated rituals that define Ajax throughout this play, it will be difficult to envisage a burial ritual that does not partake in further corruption and conflation.

Having looked closely at the way in which ritual conflation informs the plot of one Sophoclean play, I turn in the next chapter to an examination of the phenomenon of ritual repetition. Through a close reading of the *Electra*, I will consider how unhealthy repetition reflects the problems not of a broader Greek or even Athenian collective, as in the *Ajax*, but of a single family, the House of Atreus.

3

Ritual Repetition in the *Electra*

εἴτ' ἄψορον ἤξομεν πάλιν . . .

[Then we shall go back again.]

El. 53

In my discussion of ritual conflation in the *Ajax*, I stress the linear and, to some extent, teleological nature of ritual. One way of theorizing rituals, as van Gennep has shown, is to map them onto a tripartite progression moving predictably from beginning to middle to end. By manipulating this predictable progression, the playwright can also manipulate the audience's perception of the events of his narrative. I have suggested, for example, that in the *Ajax* the backward movement of the standard ritual progression on the level of the play's superstructure undermines the closural effect of funerary ritual at the end of the drama. In this chapter, by contrast, I explore the circular nature of ritual performance, focusing less on the tripartite model of ritual progression and emphasizing instead Turner's bipartite model, which identifies a pattern of alternation between structure, a period in which society is organized by static, often hierarchical relationships, and *communitas*, a period in which those relationships are destabilized and subject to change.¹ Over and over again in the *Electra*, mistakes and corruptions in ritual performance create the need for further rituals, to the point where the return to structure between rituals is elided altogether. Turner's two-part sequence is so compressed that the characters cycle only from one version of *communitas* to the next, from one ritual crisis to the next, never attaining the stability of structure in between.

The ritual crises of the *Electra* all fall within the sphere of death and funerary ritual. As we have already seen, the funeral rituals performed in response to a death

typically proceeded in a predictable fashion from *prothesis* to *ekphora* and then burial accompanied by graveside rites.² In the *Electra* these conventional funerary rituals are unfailingly either corrupted in some way or left incomplete. Such ritual errors demand ritual redress and so contribute to the pattern of ritual repetition that informs the progression of the plot from one attempted ritual to the next. It is important to recognize that death itself, the event that initiates the ritual sequence, is also a part of the pattern of repeated ritual corruption that shapes the *Electra*. While dying was, of course, not usually framed as a ritual act in historical ancient Greece, in a literary context death, especially violent death, is often ritualized to resemble sacrifice, as we have already seen.³ In Sophocles' *Electra* in particular, all the deaths referenced partake in what Zeitlin has called the motif of the corrupted sacrifice.⁴ Her work on this topic examines Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, arguing that all the deaths that occur in the trilogy stem from and echo the act of corrupt sacrifice that kills Iphigenia.⁵ Segal has shown that Sophocles reiterates this Aeschylean theme when he tells the same story in the *Electra* and probably expected his audience to recognize it.⁶ Death in the House of Atreus as Sophocles describes it is markedly consistent, each corrupt death resonating with all the deaths that have already occurred⁷ and anticipating all future deaths as cyclical acts of corrupted sacrifice.

The repetition of this ritual motif is self-perpetuating. While ritual drives the characters of this play to the completion of a sequence of obligatory funeral rites, the corruption of ritual prevents them from ever reaching the end of that sequence. Instead, each ritual instigates—demands, even—new ritual sequences, some to address the corruption or incompleteness of old rituals, some initiating entirely new rituals by perpetuating new acts of ritualized sacrifice in the name of vengeance. The socially constructed limits that usually curb the potentially unlimited ritual responses of grief or vengeance after a death are superseded by the ritual corruption of the family that Sophocles presents.⁸ Ritual consistently motivates new ritual in a potentially infinite cycle of death and death rites that Simon Goldhill aptly calls a “pathology of repetition.”⁹ Ritual repetition does not merely provide structure for the plot; it is the plot.¹⁰

In light of my argument that it is primarily ritual that motivates the actions of the characters in this play, it is necessary to offer a brief disclaimer about Apollo's role in the story, particularly since Orestes undertakes his mission of vengeance against Clytemnestra at Apollo's behest (32–37). Setting aside Orestes' connections to the Delphic god momentarily, it must be noted that Apollo cannot be connected to any of the other murders mentioned or carried out in the play. In her *agon* with Clytemnestra, Electra repeats the mythological commonplace, surely already familiar to the audience, that Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice Iphigenia was motivated by Artemis, not Apollo (563–76). Nor does Clytemnestra claim inspiration from

Apollo in her decision to murder her husband in retaliation but professes only to have been working with the goddess Dike (528–29). As for Electra, her initial motivation for participating in the murder of her mother and Aegisthus has nothing to do with Apollo but rather stems from the incorrect assumption that Orestes is no longer alive to carry out this necessary vengeance (951–57). While both Clytemnestra and Electra pray to Apollo to be propitious in the course of the play (634–59 and 1376–83, respectively), they do so only after each has decided independently on her course of action. Each prayer comes as an afterthought to the decision to commit a crime rather than as the source of that impulse, diminishing any sense that Apollo guides the actions of either woman.

In support of the argument that ritual, not Apollo, motivates the events of the *Electra*, it is also important to recognize that his initial role in inspiring Orestes' plot is so diminished over the course of the drama so as to be almost nonexistent by the time the play reaches its conclusion. When it finally comes time for Orestes to carry out the plans he has made at Apollo's bidding, the divinely inspired murder is committed offstage, where Orestes has spent most of the play. As in the rest of the drama, it is Electra's perspective and her reactions that dominate the audience's experience of Clytemnestra's death. Apollo's role in provoking the murder is relegated to the wings; instead, Clytemnestra's impieties as Electra perceives them are emphasized as justification for the murder. Moreover, immediately after the murder, Apollo's instructions are called into question. Electra asks Orestes how he is, to which her brother responds, "Things are well in the house, if Apollo prophesied well" (ἐν δόμοισι μὲν / καλῶς, Ἀπόλλων εἰ καλῶς ἐθέσπισεν, 1424–25). This tiny εἰ has prompted a great deal of speculation about Apollo's role in the play. While there is no doubt that Orestes has acted with Apollo's support,¹¹ this exchange between the siblings now calls into question the seemingly clear direction that Apollo offered at the beginning of the play. Orestes' ambiguous remark undermines the god's trustworthiness as a source of guidance in the one instance of ritualized sacrifice—Clytemnestra's death—whose motivation can be securely traced back to Apollo. Any forward momentum the god's command bestowed on the play earlier is lost by the time we reach this culminating scene. Indeed, his absence is conspicuous in light of the fact that he takes such an active role at this juncture in Aeschylus' version of the same events as related in the *Eumenides*. For all these reasons, I maintain that it is primarily ritual, and not Apollo, that determines the course of events in this play.

In support of this claim, I discuss each sacrificial death presented in the *Electra* and the rituals that ensue in absolute chronological order, showing how one ritual sequence leads predictably to the next. Ultimately (and I return to this idea at the end of the chapter), the apparent inevitability of ritual repetition that emerges in

this play supports a pessimistic reading of the *Electra* despite the ambiguities of the play's ending. Traditionally, the question of whether the play is fundamentally optimistic or pessimistic has dominated interpretations of the drama.¹² A focus on ritual and the apparently inevitable repetition to which it gives rise supports the latter interpretation. The audience cannot celebrate the victory of Orestes and Electra unreservedly when ritual cues strongly suggest that the siblings will now perpetuate the cycle, taking up the roles that Aegisthus and Clytemnestra have played and inspiring the actions of new avengers.

Death and Death Ritual in the *Electra*

Iphigenia

In the *Electra*, it quickly becomes clear that the beginning of the play is not the beginning of the story. Chronologically speaking, the first death in this story is not even Iphigenia's, although her death is most often credited with initiating the cycle of vengeful murders in the House of Atreus. The first deaths are actually those of Oenomaus and Myrtilus. The story of Myrtilus' betrayal at the hands of Pelops after helping to sabotage Oenomaus' chariot with fatal consequences is introduced at the end of the first *stasimon* (504–15), just before the *agon* in which Clytemnestra and Electra debate the justice of Iphigenia's more recent murder. This nod to the ancestral antecedents of the current violence reminds the audience that the events of this play are only the most recent incidents in a cycle of death and retribution that has gripped the house for generations. Indeed, in choosing to trace the familial curse all the way back to Pelops, Sophocles stresses the cyclical and repetitive nature of that curse even more emphatically than Aeschylus, who reports nothing before the crimes of Atreus.¹³ The Chorus reveals that ever since the death of Myrtilus, the house has been unable to escape the pattern his death instigated. The wording of the epode is significant.

ὦ Πέλοπος ἀ πρόσθεν
πολύπονος ἱππεΐα,
ὥς ἔμολες αἰανῆς
τᾷδε γᾶ.
εὔτε γάρ ὁ ποντισθεῖς
Μυρτίλος ἐκοιμάθη,
παγχρύσων δῖφρων
δυστάνοις αἰκείαις
πρόρριζος ἐκριφθεῖς,

οὐ τί πω
ἔλπιεν ἐκ τοῦδ' οἴκου
πολύπονος αἰκεία.
(504–15)

[Former woeful horsemanship of Pelops, how you came as an eternal influence upon this land. For since Myrtilus went to his rest, cast into the sea, thrown headlong from his golden chariot in terrible suffering, not at all has suffering consisting of many woes left this house.]

Pelops' effect on the land is perpetual, αἰανής. The cycle of repetition inaugurated by Pelops' actions is evoked not only by the definition of πολύπονος (of *many* woes) but also by the fact that this adjective is itself repeated, an effect reinforced by the similar repetition of αἰκεία, suffering. This choral song accumulates multiple αἰκείαι, which are multiply πολύπονοι, revealing the distant antecedents of Iphigenia's sacrifice. The subsequent episode builds on this foundation, showing that her death is likewise the antecedent for everything that transpires in the play.

In the *Oresteia*, as Zeitlin notes, Iphigenia's death is the most overt expression of the corrupted sacrifice motif,¹⁴ and Sophocles reiterates this Aeschylean motif in his own description of these events. Both *Electra* and *Clytemnestra* emphasize that Iphigenia died by an act of ritual sacrifice, repeatedly using words related to θύω as they debate Agamemnon's violent treatment of his own daughter (*Clytemnestra* with θῦσαι, 532, and ἔθυσεν, 535; *Electra* with ἐκθύσειε, 572, θύματ', 573, and ἔθυσεν, 576). Significantly, when the debate is over, both *Clytemnestra* and *Electra* use exactly the same verb of sacrifice to describe the offerings that *Clytemnestra* will now make to Apollo (θῦσαι, 631; θῦε, 632). This repetition of ritual vocabulary suggests a repetition of ritual action, exposing the implicit link between the present scene and Agamemnon's earlier ritual actions. In other words, vocabulary makes it clear that the consequences of Iphigenia's sacrifice are still being felt in the present moment. While *Clytemnestra* is only making propitiatory offerings of fruit, a ritual action that might at first appear unrelated to Iphigenia's violent death, her reason for doing so is to preserve the political power that she gained by the retaliatory killing of Agamemnon. Her offerings ask the god to validate her own act of sacrifice in slaying Agamemnon in order to avenge Iphigenia's death. Linguistic clues subtly link these three moments of ritual sacrifice and stress that each of the latter two is the direct result of the sacrifice that preceded it.

While Iphigenia's killing is unquestionably represented as an act of sacrifice in Sophocles' *Electra*, the application of Zeitlin's theory in this play, particularly the idea that one sacrificial act leads to the next, requires that the sacrifice be explicitly

corrupt. This is cast into doubt in the *agon* between Electra and Clytemnestra, where several possible interpretations of Iphigenia's death are discussed.¹⁵ Clytemnestra, whom the audience might expect to make the case for the corrupt nature of the sacrifice, focuses instead on the fact that Menelaus' children should have been offered instead of her daughter (534–45). She focuses on the choice of victim, not the impiety of the act itself. Electra's attempted justification of her father's actions further complicates the depiction of Iphigenia's death. She contends that the sacrifice was not wrong (or corrupt), because Agamemnon was compelled to commit the deed by Artemis; to the familiar detail that the Greek fleet could not sail to Troy without Iphigenia's death, Electra adds that without this death the Greek army could not return home either (570–74).¹⁶

In their attempts to bolster their respective moral positions, both women gloss over the most salient point in assessing the piety of Iphigenia's sacrifice: namely, that Artemis' demand for a human victim instead of an animal one is a shocking departure from conventional pious sacrifice.¹⁷ It seems likely that an ancient theater audience would have been alert to this omission in *Electra* and Clytemnestra's argument because Aeschylus emphasizes the corrupt nature of Iphigenia's sacrifice so heavily in the *Oresteia*, particularly in the *parodos* of the *Agamemnon*. There is strong evidence that Aeschylus' plays were revived in the fifth century, suggesting that details from the *Oresteia* would have been fresh for at least some portion of Sophocles' audience even decades after the original performance of the trilogy.¹⁸ The conspicuous absence of any mention of the themes that are so heavily stressed in Aeschylus asks the audience to fill in these details by reference to Aeschylus' portrayal of Iphigenia's death as arbitrary, oppressive, and cruel, violating not only ritual order but also family and social order.¹⁹ Even though Sophocles describes Iphigenia's sacrifice in less detail than Aeschylus, this scene still evokes the moral and theological outrage explicit in Aeschylus' depiction.

More subtly, the fact that both Clytemnestra and Electra manipulate the memory of Iphigenia's sacrifice to portray Agamemnon as they wish represents a retrospective corruption of her death. Clytemnestra downplays Iphigenia's suffering by portraying the sacrifice as an offense to her wifely virtue, since she did not run off like Helen, while Electra downplays the harm done to Iphigenia by excusing her father's actions on the basis of both divine and political necessity. Their verbal contortions place self-justification and personal allegiances above the truth and, moreover, illustrate that their present thoughts and actions are still very much influenced by Agamemnon's sacrificial act. As Electra later observes, "Shameful deeds are taught by shameful deeds" (αἰσχροῖς γὰρ αἰσχρὰ πράγματ' ἐκδιδάσκειται, 621).²⁰ In all, it is clear that Iphigenia's death is an act of corrupt sacrifice that both arises from past misdeeds and provokes and influences future ones.

Agamemnon

The *Electra* describes Iphigenia's death only briefly and omits mention of what happens to her body after death. Rather than dwelling on her funeral, the play elides these details in order to focus attention on what her death provokes: the murder of Agamemnon. In contrast, Sophocles gives a great deal of attention to the moment of Agamemnon's death and the funerary rituals that follow it. The rituals surrounding the death both reiterate earlier ritual actions and are themselves repeated when other characters die. An examination of what happens to Agamemnon at the moment of his death and to his corpse afterward therefore offers perhaps the greatest insight into the patterns of ritual repetition that motivate the progression of the play.

The details of Agamemnon's murder confirm that, like Iphigenia's, it is ritualized as an act of corrupt human sacrifice. While his friends and enemies alike predominantly refer to his murder without evoking any particular ritual element,²¹ two details of its description suggest that Sophocles chose to situate his own portrayal of this death in a wider literary context in order to stress the ritual impiety of Clytemnestra's reciprocal violence against her husband, ἀθεώτατα in the words of the Sophoclean Chorus (124). In a first literary reference, Sophocles' *Electra* includes the Homeric detail that Agamemnon was killed at a feast (203), not in the bath as in Aeschylus.²² In the Homeric version of the murder, Agamemnon is cut down like an ox at the manger,²³ a simile that, because the ox is not slain in proper sacrificial circumstances, itself suggests ritual impropriety. Zeitlin takes this reference to imply that Agamemnon's death in the *Electra* takes place at the sacrificial hearth, though there is nothing concrete in the text to confirm this.²⁴ The second detail is the emphasis placed on the fact that Agamemnon was killed by means of an axe, mentioned once by Electra (99) and twice by the Chorus (196, 484–85). This emphasis recalls Clytemnestra's demand for a man-slaying axe in order to kill Orestes in the *Choephoroi* (889), a near repetition, narrowly averted, of the sacrificial act she commits in the *Agamemnon*. Indeed, in Sophocles' version of this story, the axe is described as actually remembering the violence it committed against Agamemnon. In the Chorus's description: "Neither the lord of the Greeks who fathered you nor the ancient two-edged bronze axe, which slew him in most outrageous suffering, will ever forget" (οὐ γάρ ποτ' ἀμναστέϊ γ' ὁ φύ- / σας σ' Ἑλλάνων ἄναξ, / οὐδ' ἂ παλαιὰ χαλκόπλη- / κτος ἀμφήκης γένυς, / ἃ νιν κατέπεφνεν αἰσχίσταις ἐν αἰκείαις, 482–86). This is a cue to the audience to look backward as well, both in the story Sophocles tells and in the literary tradition more broadly.

Therefore, though the sacrificial imagery is muted in much of Sophocles' version of Agamemnon's death, this imagery is nonetheless evoked through references

to earlier versions of the same story (Homer's and Aeschylus') that were likely familiar to the audience. It is important to note that Sophocles, in his choice of vocabulary, emphasizes this literary repetition through repetition of his own in order to construe Agamemnon's death itself as a repetition of former corrupt sacrificial deaths. The use of the word *aikeia* in the Chorus's description of the axe (486) anticipates the two further occurrences of this word later in the very same choral ode to describe the corrupt death of Myrtilus (511, 515). Sophocles appears to confirm through this repeated vocabulary that Agamemnon's death must be understood as taking its place in a long line of connected murders stemming from those of Oenomaus and Myrtilus, just like Iphigenia's.²⁵ This concatenation of repetitions also serves to emphasize Clytemnestra as both inheritor and perpetuator of the cyclical ritual violence of the family she has married into.

While it is clear that some kind of ritual attention has been given to Agamemnon after his death, the details of his funeral are largely overlooked. The most obvious sign of funeral ritual is the existence of a marked grave, since Orestes, Clytemnestra, and both sisters all at some point in the play intend to bring offerings to the same known location. Indeed, the tomb of Agamemnon serves as a focal point for much of the action of the play.²⁶ But beyond the simple fact of burial, it is difficult to know which, if any, of the other traditional rituals Agamemnon received at his funeral. It is obvious that from Electra's perspective he has not received the proper ritual attention and, unable to properly integrate into the world of the dead, remains in limbo. Her position as his perpetual mourner is correspondingly liminal, as she fails to reintegrate fully into the society of the living.²⁷ To the extent that she talks about Agamemnon's funeral rites, the core of her complaint is always that he has not been properly lamented, a task that she must perform indefinitely until the ritual injustice has been righted. She bewails the fact that nobody laments him except for her (100–101) and that she has never been permitted to weep as much as she feels is necessary (285–86). It therefore appears that the usual ritual contexts for lament, especially the period of *prothesis*, have not been properly observed.

The ritual impropriety of the treatment of Agamemnon's body, however, is not merely a crime of omission. Clytemnestra performs two nonstandard ritual actions over the body that perpetuate the corruption of the initial act of murder. The first ritual is her act of wiping the bloody murder weapon on Agamemnon's head (445–46). While many readings of this ambiguous action focus on its apotropaic qualities, protecting her from either bloodguilt or a vengeful ghost,²⁸ it is equally important to understand the corrupt nature of the ritual. James Hogan argues that Clytemnestra's actions represent a perverted metaphorical version of the typical libations used for washing the dead and, at the same time, perversely

conflate Agamemnon's body with the sacrificial pig whose blood was often used to cleanse a murderer of his bloodguilt, as in the case of Orestes in the *Eumenides*.²⁹ Patrick Finglass, too, reads this action as an obvious perversion of the more usual bathing of the corpse, since Agamemnon is washed in his own blood, not in purifying water.³⁰ He also suggests that wiping Agamemnon's own blood on him may be a perversion of a ritual commonly employed during animal sacrifice,³¹ once again invoking the Homeric image of the bull at the manger. As both critics persuasively argue, Clytemnestra's ritual actions extend the figurative sacrifice of Agamemnon beyond the moment of his death, treating him quite literally like a sacrificial bull after the slaughter. However the audience interprets her actions, which are not unambiguous, the ritual nature of what she is doing and the corruption of that ritual are clear.

Clytemnestra's second ritual action involving the body is, if anything, more perverted. She cuts off her dead husband's hands and feet and places them under his armpits in a process called *maschalismos* (445). This ritualized treatment of Agamemnon's corpse—treating it like an animal chopped up for a postritual celebration—offers perhaps an even clearer reference to sacrificial ritual than smearing the body with its own blood. Sophocles offers no comment on the purpose of this ritual, but most scholars see it as a way of restraining the potentially vengeful ghost.³² In Sophocles, as in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, where Clytemnestra performs the same ritual (439), the action is portrayed by those who report it—Electra and the Aeschylean Chorus, respectively—as a shocking dishonor to Agamemnon. In contrast to the usual goals of funerary ritual, helping the deceased to find his way to the world of the dead, Clytemnestra's *maschalismos* duplicates the violence of his death, protracting rather than addressing his ritual liminality. Already it is possible to see how ritual begets ritual in this play. The corruption of Agamemnon's violent death, which stems directly from Iphigenia's violent death, is compounded by Clytemnestra's violent ritual treatment of his body, which in turn precipitates Electra's unnaturally extended lament. In each case, the corruption of ritual action reliably begets further corrupt ritual, contributing to a potentially infinite cycle of ritual repetitions. Whereas such rituals would normally restore structure after funereal *communitas*, in the House of Atreus these rituals extend the period of *communitas* indefinitely.

Finally, we turn to the third and final step in Agamemnon's funerary process, the graveside offerings after the completion of the burial. These were normally performed once structure was restored and the deceased was securely in the underworld, even as the mourner reintegrated into society. In the *Electra* these offerings are made while the house is still in a disorganized state of ritual *communitas* and serve to highlight that reality. Whereas Sophocles makes only sparing reference to

the two earlier ritual steps, death and funeral, the grave offerings made at Agamemnon's tomb in the course of this drama are described in expansive detail and play a central role in the plot. Taken together, these commemorative rites demonstrate the agency of ritual in this play and the way in which it both is and causes repetitive action.

As a direct consequence of Clytemnestra's murder of and perverted funeral for Agamemnon, monthly rites in celebration of his death take place under her supervision. Each month on the anniversary of the murder, Electra explains:

ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἐγγελῶσα τοῖς ποιουμένοις,
εὐροῦσ' ἐκείνην ἡμέραν, ἐν ᾗ τότε
πατέρα τὸν ἄμὸν ἐκ δόλου κατέκτανεν,
ταύτη χοροῦς ἴστησι καὶ μηλοσφαγεῖ
θεοῖσιν ἔμμην' ἱερὰ τοῖς σωτηρίοις.
(277–81)

[As though she were laughing over what she has done, determining the day on which she killed my father by deceit, [Clytemnestra] establishes choruses and slaughters flocks in a monthly sacrifice to the gods who have preserved her.]

Clytemnestra's rites represent an attempt to establish her own triumphant attitude toward Agamemnon's death as the shared public attitude by retrojecting the joy of these monthly rites onto Agamemnon's own ritualized death.³³ Ultimately, these rites take their place in the long sequence of corrupted acts of sacrifice that define her doomed household, calling to mind Iphigenia's and Agamemnon's deaths in particular.³⁴ Jan Kamerbeek notes, for example, that the monthly feast that celebrates Agamemnon's death is called by the name typically given to the communal meal that followed a sacrifice, conflating the slaughter of the flocks and of Agamemnon himself.³⁵ This perverted ritual allows Clytemnestra to enjoy perpetually what is, for her, the happy memory of her husband's sacrifice, reenacting the violence with which she treated him in life and death through the sacrifice of actual animal victims.

Sophocles offers the audience no reason to think that the way in which the sheep are slaughtered in Clytemnestra's monthly rites is itself corrupt or polluted. Rather, the perversity of these rites depends on the fact that they stand in place of the normal graveside rites that should be accorded to Agamemnon. Although it was customary to visit the grave on the third, ninth, and thirtieth days after the funeral, regular rites took place only annually thereafter. By instituting a monthly

celebration of Agamemnon's death, Clytemnestra distorts the usual thirtieth-day rites, repeating them indefinitely. What should bring the initially concentrated period of mourning to an end actually prolongs Agamemnon's liminal state by deferring rather than facilitating a return to structure.³⁶ Moreover, Clytemnestra, rather than keeping the funeral celebrations in the family as was appropriate, appears to implicate the entire Mycenaean community in these rites by establishing choruses. Her ritual actions draw the entire community into a perpetual and repeating memorial of her crimes. So long as she retains authority, this joyful yet macabre act of remembrance continues to reiterate the sacrificial death of Agamemnon.

This monthly ritual provides the background for several irregular grave offerings that are made on Agamemnon's tomb in the course of the play. In spite of the fact that these are individual, nonrepeated ritual acts, they are nonetheless governed by the same pattern of ritual repetition that motivates the actions of most characters in this play. Just as Clytemnestra's monthly sacrifices preserve Agamemnon's permanent liminal position and prevent his death rites from achieving a definitive end, these grave offerings also prolong his ritual liminality. While they are, for the most part, technically correct and complete, they all provoke further ritual action, usually when they are misinterpreted by others. These misapprehensions forestall any completion or conclusion in Agamemnon's funeral rites.

The first set of grave offerings mentioned in the play are those that Orestes promises in accordance with the instructions of Apollo before setting his revenge plot in motion. Both Orestes (51–53) and the Paedagogus (82–84) explicitly refer to offerings in the prologue. Much later in the play, Chrysothemis confirms that Orestes fulfills his promise with a lock of hair, flowers, and libations of milk (893–901). I will return to Orestes' offerings after considering the others made on Agamemnon's grave, since the role that his offerings play in the pattern of repetitive action in the *Electra* becomes apparent only after the offerings are discovered.

The second set of offerings at Agamemnon's grave are those that Clytemnestra sends with Chrysothemis. There is some uncertainty as to what exactly these offerings (ἐντάφια, 326) are. It is clear that at least part of the offering is some kind of libation (χοή, 406, 440; λουτρά, 434, 445), but Electra also refers to these offerings as ἔμπυρα (405), which, as Finglass explains, could refer to the vessels in which the libations are carried or to burnt offerings.³⁷ Zeitlin offers the best explanation for the numerous references to these offerings and the numerous names by which they are called, proposing that all this uncertainty is a reflection of Clytemnestra's anxiety.³⁸ She is spurred to ritual action by a dream featuring Agamemnon's ghost and a scepter that grows into a bough overshadowing all Mycenae (417–23); the clear implication, surely reinforced by the audience's knowledge of the *Oresteia*

and its own prophetic dream,³⁹ is that Agamemnon has become a vengeful ghost, unable to enter the world of the dead because of the corrupt nature of his death and funeral. Indeed, the *loutra* Clytemnestra now proposes are juxtaposed in the text with her act of washing Agamemnon's corpse in his own blood (445–46), emphasizing both the similarity of these actions and the way in which the latter directly necessitates the former. It is also possible that the word *loutra*, which more usually refers to water for bathing rather than for ritual offerings, subtly evokes the Aeschylean death scene in which Agamemnon is slaughtered in his own bathtub.⁴⁰ It is clear that the queen's present ritual actions represent the continuation of corrupt patterns set in motion by her past ritual actions. The corrupt rituals surrounding Agamemnon's death have generated not only her monthly sacrifices but now two additional graveside offerings. The pattern of a single corrupt ritual that gives rise to others is perpetuated.

These offerings, like so many rituals in this play, not only derive from earlier rituals but also prompt further corrupt ritual activity. When Electra persuades Chrysothemis to disobey their mother and discard Clytemnestra's offerings, her instructions sound very much like instructions for a purification ritual; she asks Chrysothemis to scatter the offerings to the winds or bury them in dust (435–36).⁴¹ But while such a purification ritual would, typically, permanently destroy Clytemnestra's offerings and the malevolence they represent, in this particular scenario such purity (and finality) is neither achieved nor even desired. Electra hopes that these items will remain in the ground until they can serve as grave offerings for Clytemnestra herself (437–38). The purification, with its lack of definitive closure (the impure objects kept in reserve for future use), resonates with Agamemnon's as-yet-unresolved ritual status. It also accurately predicts the corrupt ritual of Clytemnestra's own death, in which Electra does indeed participate. The promise of a purification ritual, but one that is atypical and corrupt, takes its place in a long line of ritual actions that fail to bring closure and, instead, catalyze more, similar rituals.

Before they can be disposed of, Clytemnestra's grave offerings, which never reach their proper place on Agamemnon's grave, generate in Electra the desire to make grave offerings of her own. Once again, ritual motivates further ritual action. And, once again, this newest ritual act is a reiteration of one that has already been set in motion. Electra's instructions to Chrysothemis to dedicate locks of their hair (as well as Electra's girdle) are a clear repetition of Orestes' earlier decision to dedicate locks of his hair (448–52 vs. 51–53, 82–84), even as they remind the audience of Clytemnestra's recent offerings. Many readers of this play attempt to distinguish Electra's offerings from Clytemnestra's, suggesting that the former are made with pure intent while the latter are made in bad faith.⁴² While the two women certainly

approach their offerings with different attitudes, the physical reality of these offerings proves them to be the same. Electra's intent in making offerings on her father's grave is undermined because the audience never witnesses or even hears report of their completion; like Clytemnestra's offerings, so far as the audience knows, Electra's never reach the grave. This ritual, like most in the play, remains incomplete and fails to restore structure. As such, it requires further ritual redress.

Electra's offerings are interrupted because when Chrysothemis goes to set them on the grave, she finds those that have been made by Orestes and the Paedagogus. These latest offerings are a new iteration of this already familiar ritual act and, moreover, a repetition of what the audience, but not the sisters, have heard at the beginning of the play. In dramatic terms, the primary function of Electra's offerings is not to honor her father's grave; rather, they serve principally to make the sisters aware of a ritual now introduced in triplicate in the play by leading to the discovery of their brother's gifts. Chrysothemis' excited distraction as she reports what she has seen at the grave causes her to omit any mention of the ritual task for which she was sent (871–919). The audience cannot know what transpires offstage unless a character reports it, and the stage action suggests that Electra's offerings have been forgotten in the excitement of the discovery of what Chrysothemis believes to be solid proof of Orestes' return.

Orestes' gifts, therefore, likely represent the only completed offerings of the three attempts made. In spite of its completion, however, the integrity of his ritual action is undermined by what follows. Looking forward, Segal suggests, Orestes' flowing streams of milk are answered by the flowing streams of his mother's blood that he will spill as a final offering for his father.⁴³ His peaceful grave offerings, a ritual preliminary to his vengeance plot, are tainted by their close association with the violence that follows from them. More immediately, these offerings must be counted a failure for two reasons related to the progression of the drama. First, they fail in their purpose of honoring the dead Agamemnon. Aside from Orestes, the Paedagogus, and Pylades, nobody actually appreciates that honor has been done to Agamemnon's grave. Electra, completely taken in by the Paedagogus' detailed lie about Orestes' death at Delphi, thinks that Orestes' offerings for Agamemnon must actually be intended to honor her brother, now dead (932–33), and she easily persuades Chrysothemis of this. The two sisters choose their next actions on the basis of this false inference. Second, these offerings fail to bring about the recognition between Orestes and Electra that the audience has surely been anticipating since the beginning of the play on the basis of mythical knowledge. In all three tragedians, Orestes' lock of hair is linked closely with the siblings' reunion,⁴⁴ but whereas in Aeschylus and Euripides the lock of hair persuades Electra to at least consider the other evidence for her brother's return, in Sophocles' play it brings

the characters to a deductive impasse. The failure of Orestes' offerings to bring about a recognition scene makes this ritual a narrative dead end and creates a need for the intervention of new ritual activity. The necessity that the siblings should meet requires other rituals, these ones concerned with the false death of Orestes.

In sum, of all the many rituals performed in response to Agamemnon's death, not one is unblemished by either corruption or incompleteness. Each of these rituals consistently reiterates the characteristics of past rituals and elicits the performance of new ones, which are affected by similar problems and perpetuate the cycle. These rituals support the conclusion that the development of the plot is motivated by a pattern of ritual repetition that is both consistent and readily apparent to the audience.

Orestes

While Orestes' false death receives less stage time in the *Electra*, introduced only halfway through the play, it serves much the same dramatic role as Agamemnon's death in perpetuating the ongoing cycle of ritual repetitions. The long messenger speech in which the Paedagogus relates Orestes' fake death at Delphi has attracted much critical attention because of its unusual length and detail.⁴⁵ Laying aside most of the questions typically considered by scholars, I focus on two important elements of this plot point. The first is that Orestes' "death" in a fabricated chariot race takes its place in the growing list of corrupt deaths associated with the House of Atreus. This false death follows directly from that of Agamemnon and the need for a deceptive plot to enact vengeance for the murdered king. It also reenacts the original crime of his ancestral home, establishing a genealogical link between the current vengeance plot and the cunning murder of Oenomaus in a chariot race referenced at the end of the first *stasimon*.⁴⁶ Orestes' current actions therefore take their place in the ongoing series of ritual crises that afflict the Pelopidae. A second important feature of the story is the Paedagogus' report, in his account of the events at Delphi, that the men of Phocis burned Orestes' mangled remains and put the ashes in a bronze urn for transport (757–59). This crucial detail lays the groundwork for all the subsequent rituals shown in the play, which revolve around this stage property. First and foremost, the urn persuades Clytemnestra to accept the report. After she sees the urn, she no longer expects to see a body and fully trusts the messenger, which paves the way for the revenge plot to follow.⁴⁷ Once again, as the subsequent events confirm, ritual (even sham ritual) consistently begets more ritual.

Everything that the Paedagogus reports about the chariot race, Orestes' death, and the cremation is fabricated, but the consequences of these fake rituals are very

real. Most obvious is Electra's intense regret that she could not participate in the funerary rites for Orestes. She laments, "Alas for me, that I did not tend to your body with washing water with my own hands, nor did I take up your pitiful weight from the all-consuming fire" (κοῦτ' ἐν φίλαισι χερσίν ἡ τάλαιν' ἐγὼ / λουτροῖς σ' ἐκόσμησ' οὔτε παμφλέκτου πυρὸς / ἀνειλόμην, ὡς εἰκός, ἄθλιον βάρος, 1138–40). In a sense, the mere mention of these rites, which Electra thinks have already been performed, is a kind of perverse repetition. Rehearsing the details of these rituals, even unconsciously naming the *prothesis* she could not attend as she addresses what she thinks are Orestes' ashes (προῦθηκας, 1198),⁴⁸ she feels the sharp grief that she would have experienced if she had been present at the supposed funeral. Electra's grief for Orestes is also repetitive of the grief she feels for her father's death, reiterating the regret she expresses about the limitations of her role in Agamemnon's funeral earlier in the play. Indeed, Segal even suggests that the weight of repetition is felt across playwrights, Electra's sorrow for Orestes here reinforcing and reduplicating the pain the Electra of the *Choephori* demonstrates.⁴⁹

Just like the deaths and the funerals that Electra's mourning calls to mind, her own grief contains an element of corruption, reiterating the ritual pattern of her household. The fact that she laments for the death of a person whom the audience knows to be standing before her makes her devastation perverse. Her heartfelt grief ironically takes on the same fake quality as the false story that prompted it. And, in fact, just as the false messenger speech prompts the action that follows, Electra's unnecessary grief triggers yet another cycle of death ritual as the presence of the urn, the physical "proof" that these rituals have taken place, drives her to wish for her own death, that she might share Orestes' fate and dwell in the urn with him (1165–70).⁵⁰ This turn of events is prevented only by the effect her grief has on Orestes, eliciting the revelation that he is still alive.

The news of Orestes' death also affects Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, obliging them to perform the customary death rituals for his ashes and inspiring yet another ritual repetition that motivates the forward momentum of the plot. As the queen prepares the urn for burial, this stage property exerts the same deceptive influence on her that it exerted on Electra a few scenes earlier. As before, this newest ritual performed by Clytemnestra generates further ritual action. There is a moment of great moral ambiguity as she prepares to give Orestes' ashes due ritual attention offstage, as Orestes, not her dead son but her soon-to-be murderer, looks on.⁵¹ The urn, representing a false death and false death rituals, now brings about a real corrupt death; Clytemnestra's own son murders her in the midst of her act of mourning.

Ritual repetition advances the plot yet again when the necessity of funerary rituals for Orestes deceives Aegisthus. Approaching what he imagines to be Orestes' corpse (as he has not heard the false report that Orestes' body has been returned to

Mycenae as cremated ashes), he too feels obliged to make some ritual gesture, asking the disguised Orestes to uncover the body so that he can lament properly for his kinsman (1468–71). Aegisthus’ apparently genuine desire to mourn for Orestes—or at least his willingness to go through the ritual motions for the sake of propriety—is what allows Orestes to catch him unawares and take him prisoner. However much the audience has been prejudiced against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by Electra over the course of the play, the rulers’ willingness to accord a proper burial to the enemy they believe has been thwarted, even if only done pro forma, gives them a certain moral credibility. Their deaths, which follow swiftly on this attempted ritual action, are all the more disturbing for being juxtaposed with their ritual piety. The cyclical pattern of death and death rites that has informed the play so far is extended, as funerary ritual for Orestes now leads to two further deaths that reiterate the corruption of those that have already been described. It is once again clear that ritual has agency in driving the development of the plot in the *Electra*.

Clytemnestra

Although the details of Clytemnestra’s death are only sparsely related in the *Electra*, the matricide has inspired a great deal of critical debate, most of which is not significant for my discussion here. For example, scholars have examined thoroughly the extent to which Sophocles attempts to deemphasize or gloss over the fact of her murder⁵² and the question of whether Electra’s verbal encouragement counts as active or passive participation.⁵³ Setting these kinds of questions aside, my interest in the matricide focuses on the way in which Clytemnestra’s death takes its place in the sequence of repetitive deaths and accompanying rituals that motivate the play’s action. As we have seen, she is struck down while preparing funerary rites for the urn that she thinks contains her son’s ashes. The impious interruption of this ritual act with bloodshed is another example of the perversion of ritual in the *Electra*. Clytemnestra’s death reveals that funerary ritual has itself become an instrument of murder in the House of Atreus.⁵⁴ Moreover, this bloody ritual inversion once again calls up sacrificial imagery, reiterating the pattern of corrupt sacrifice that has influenced every death described so far in the play.⁵⁵ The audience is conditioned to think of Clytemnestra’s death as a sacrifice from the start, as the Delphic prophecy related by Orestes describes the object of the mission as “the sacrifices of a just hand” (χειρὸς ἐνδίκου σφαγᾶς, 37). The sacrificial theme is reinforced when Orestes and Pylades emerge from the palace after Clytemnestra is killed and the Chorus announces, “A gory hand drips with a sacrifice for Ares, and I cannot lay blame” (φοινία δὲ χεῖρ / στάζει θυηλῆς Ἄρεος, οὐδ’ ἔχω ψέγειν, 1422–23).

In her sacrificial death, Clytemnestra reiterates her first action in the play, offerings to Apollo, and her first words in her argument with Electra over Iphigenia's sacrifice. Clytemnestra has now become a θνηλή herself, reminding the audience on an etymological level of her first fruit offerings (θῦσαι, 631, and θῦε, 632) and the language of her quarrel with Electra (θῦσαι, 532; ἔθυσεν, 535; ἐκθύσειε, 572; θύματ', 573; ἔθυσεν, 576).⁵⁶ Subtly, her death reinforces the sense that all the ritual actions in the House of Atreus are thematically and, indeed, causally linked.

Most importantly, her death is shown to both repeat Agamemnon's impure sacrificial death and to stem from it. The first hint of this comes as Electra and Orestes prepare to set their plot in motion. Electra boldly declares that she is not afraid of Clytemnestra, claiming that women who stay inside represent no threat, but Orestes cautiously asks her to remember that even women have Ares in them (1243–44). The use of Ares' name looks forward to the impending moment when Clytemnestra will become a sacrifice to that god (1423). More overtly, it also reminds the audience of the warlike deeds of which Clytemnestra has proven capable, particularly killing her own husband. This oblique reference to Agamemnon's death is confirmed by the very explicit way in which the presentation of her death echoes that of Agamemnon in his eponymous Aeschylean play. The Chorus's response to Agamemnon's offstage death in the *Agamemnon* and Electra's response to Clytemnestra's offstage death in *Electra* are closely parallel. In particular, as many have noted, Clytemnestra's death cries match those of Agamemnon in his Aeschylean death scene in intensity, vocabulary, and even in number.⁵⁷ So strong are the parallels between the two scenes that Holger Johansen has proposed that Sophocles intended for his audience to understand Clytemnestra's death in the *Electra* as direct retribution for the murder of Agamemnon presented in Aeschylus' play.⁵⁸

At this juncture the audience will reasonably expect Clytemnestra's death to be followed by the performance or at least discussion of some kind of funeral for her. Such is the pattern that has been established thus far in the play both by Agamemnon's funeral and the attempted rites for Orestes. But here it becomes clear that the cycle of repetition is accelerating. Orestes' death rites lead directly to not one death but two: Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus'. The intervention of this second murder cuts off the expected ritual sequence of death, funeral, and graveside offerings and delays funeral rites for Clytemnestra until after the play has ended. Given the family history that has been exposed in the course of the play, there is no reason to be optimistic about the likely character of these death rituals. Her funeral, it seems probable, will incorporate the same kinds of defilements that marred Agamemnon's, as Orestes and Electra exact retribution for their years of suffering.⁵⁹ The play ends without offering any hope that Clytemnestra's funeral will avoid the ritual corruption that characterizes all the past funerals of her household.

Aegisthus

It is certain that Aegisthus is going to die, but events are moving so fast by the time his death is imminent that even this initial ritual phase of withdrawal from community is cut short. As in the case of Clytemnestra's death, the details are sparse; nonetheless, there are plenty of hints to assure the audience that Aegisthus' death too will repeat the corruption of the other sacrificial deaths described in the play. We have already seen that his death, like hers, stems directly from the funeral rites for Orestes. Aegisthus is drawn into Orestes' trap when he asks for the shroud to be removed from the corpse that he believes to be Orestes but is actually Clytemnestra so that he can lament his kinsman (1468–71). Clytemnestra's body under the sheet plays the same deceptive role in facilitating Aegisthus' death that the urn did in hers, clearly linking the two murders.⁶⁰

Once the ruse is revealed, two details confirm that Aegisthus' death will reiterate the corrupt sacrifice motif. The first is Electra's call for silence (1483–84), an important ritual condition for the act of sacrifice, apparently even when the victim is human.⁶¹ There are certainly pragmatic reasons to forbid Aegisthus to speak, but the ritual overtones of Electra's demand are strong in light of the sacrificial imagery used throughout the play. More overtly, just like Clytemnestra's death, Aegisthus' clearly reiterates some aspects of the murder of Agamemnon. Orestes refuses Aegisthus the right to choose the place of his own death, insisting that Aegisthus meet his fate at the same hearth where Agamemnon was killed (1495–96).⁶² The hearth is the place for domestic sacrifices, and, like Agamemnon, Aegisthus will now become a symbolic victim upon it.

In addition to these details, Jack Kells suggests that the play ends with an ironic reference to the sacrificial theme that has been so prominent throughout it. In their closing words, the Chorus says, "Seed of Atreus, having suffered many things, you have emerged with difficulty in freedom, brought to fulfillment by the current effort" (ὦ σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως, ὡς πολλὰ παθὼν / δι' ἐλευθερίας μόλις ἐξῆλθες / τῇ νῦν ὁρμῇ τελεωθέν, 1508–10). The word τελεωθέν, from τελειόω, may remind the audience of τέλειος, Kells suggests, which can be used to describe animals prepared for sacrifice.⁶³ For Segal, if Kells is right that the audience would have made this etymological connection, this final reference to sacrifice in the play—in fact, the very last word of the play—is meant to suggest a now-familiar pattern: namely, that the avengers of one perverted sacrifice inevitably become the sacrificial victims of another.⁶⁴ By this reading, the last words of the play confirm that Electra and Orestes are caught up in a cycle that will eventually lead to their own sacrificial deaths.

Though mentioned only briefly, Aegisthus' funeral rites are alluded to, unlike Clytemnestra's. The ritual instructions come from Electra, who says:

ἀλλ' ὥς τάχιστα κτεῖνε καὶ κτανὼν πρόθεξ
ταφεῦσιν ὧν τόνδ' εἰκόξ ἐστι τυγχάνειν,
ἄποπτον ἡμῶν. ὥς ἐμοὶ τόδ' ἂν κακῶν
μόνον γένοιτο τῶν πάλαι λυτήριον.

(1487–90)

[Kill him as quickly as possible, and when you've done that, lay him out for the buriers he deserves to have, out of our sight. For this alone could provide me with relief from past troubles.]

There are several interesting details in these instructions. First, as Jebb notes, *πρόθεξ* alludes to the ritual of *prothesis*,⁶⁵ foreshadowing the sequence of death rituals that the murder of Aegisthus will initiate. More controversial is the reference to his buriers, *ταφεῦσιν*, and the possible translations of this word. Some suggest that it evokes the ignominy of Homeric dogs and birds,⁶⁶ while others, unwilling to espouse so specific an interpretation, agree simply that it implies the mistreatment of the corpse.⁶⁷ On the other hand, there are those who argue that the mistreatment of Aegisthus' body cannot be inferred from these words alone.⁶⁸ The passage is ambiguous. In the context of the repetitive cycle of corrupt rituals that has dominated the action of the play, I suggest that those who argue that Aegisthus' body will be, in some way, mistreated have the stronger argument. The weight of what has already transpired in the play tips the balance in favor of the corrupt and polluted. There is every reason to think that the cycle of ritual repetition will continue beyond the end of the play and that, very likely, Electra will become guilty of the same ritual crimes as her mother.

Liminality and Lament

It is quite clear, then, that self-perpetuating death ritual stemming from corrupt, sacrificial deaths is a driving force in the *Electra*. In the House of Atreus, corrupt murder consistently initiates a sequence of ritual actions, which then give rise to further ritual sequences. Every death described in this play partakes in some form in the same tripartite ritual progression from death to funeral to graveside rites. More than this, however, each of these steps in the ritual sequence is affected by corruption or incompleteness, ensuring that each death reliably instigates

new rituals and, eventually, new sacrificial deaths. The ritual obligation inspired by what Zeitlin has called the corrupt sacrifice motif appears to have the power to drive the actions of nearly all of the characters described in this play.

Although the repetition of death and death ritual in the *Electra* is overt and emphatic, perhaps even more visible is Electra's perpetual lament. Her grief, one of the most conspicuous ritual elements in this play, offers a visible and audible corollary to the never-ending cycle of corrupt death and funerary rites. It takes place in full view of the audience, in contrast with most of the other ritual activities mentioned in the drama, and in nearly every scene of the play. This prominence serves to highlight two important features of the lament. First, the audience witnesses directly the excessive and corrupt nature of Electra's sorrow, which, it is clear, has been extended far beyond the proper temporal limits. Second, the play demonstrates that her lament is "contagious," spreading from the heroine to nearly everybody with whom she comes into contact, reproducing itself in others. The same process is reiterated, albeit less intensely, in the audience's cognitive and emotional response to her suffering and uncontrolled lamentation. Both of these features of her lament call attention to its repetitive nature—repetitive in itself and in its effect on others—and reinforce the audience's perception of the corrupt nature of the death rituals described and enacted in this play. Most importantly, Electra's lament offers a tangible illustration of the fact that the members of the House of Atreus exist in a perpetual state of *communitas* without intervening periods of structure to allow for the reassertion of societal order.

The importance that Electra's lament will have in the play is signaled by her mournful monody in the second half of the prologue, before the entrance of the Chorus and its lyric song. This is the only example of the protagonist singing lyrics before the Chorus in the extant plays of Sophocles (the practice is more typically Euripidean).⁶⁹ This emotional lyric outburst, usually the climax of despair for other Sophoclean characters, is presented from the start as Electra's day-to-day experience.⁷⁰ Her first words in the play, *ὦ μοί μοι δύστηνος* (77), heard from off-stage, divert attention from Orestes and the revenge plot he has just presented and insist that the audience focus not on the plotters—or on Apollo's involvement in the revenge plot—but on the suffering of the one their plot is designed to rescue. Electra's interruption of the planning of Orestes and the Paedagogus conveys the fact that her ritual lament will guide the audience's experience of the play, while the intrigue is, for much of the drama, to be relegated to the wings.⁷¹

It is apparent throughout this play that Electra's lament is utterly abnormal. In the ancient Greek world, when somebody was in mourning, the deceased and the mourner were conceived of as sharing a single liminal state, withdrawn from society until such time as the deceased was successfully integrated into the world of the

dead and the mourner successfully reintegrated into the world of the living.⁷² This shared state of seclusion and deprivation was a temporary abdication from normal life, endured only as long as it took to perform the rituals that would release both living and dead from their liminality. Part of Electra's oddity is that she embraces the conditions of mourning with disconcerting enthusiasm, even those that are not a part of the normal mourning process but are externally imposed as a punishment by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.⁷³ When Electra is told, for example, that Aegisthus plans to imprison her in a tomb-like cave, she embraces the prospect of being locked away in a permanent state of mourning seclusion so that she may escape as far as possible from the family that continues to dishonor Agamemnon (391).⁷⁴ She actively pursues and prolongs a state of liminal suffering, a version of *communitas* that is more usually simply endured until the completion of the funerary rites brings it to a natural end and reestablishes structure.

Unlike a normal, healthy state of mourning, Electra's lament has no natural end.⁷⁵ Her lament is closely associated with the word *ἀεί*, "always," which occurs no fewer than fifteen times,⁷⁶ and her self-identification with Procne and Niobe, mythical women who also transgress the normal temporal limits of mourning, stresses her endless liminal state (147–52).⁷⁷ This perpetual lament is closely linked to the repetition of the death rituals that motivate the development of the plot. Since lament is purely liminal, with no defined beginning or end, it depends for its temporal limits on the correct performance of the funerary rituals it accompanies. The liminal quality of lament is synonymous with the *communitas* in which mourners exist until the completion of the *prothesis*, *ekphora*, and initial graveside rites. Under normal circumstances, the conclusion of these associated rites informs the mourner that the time for lament is over. In the *Electra*, however, the corrupt nature of these rituals denies the closure that would otherwise signal an end to lament; these rituals and the lament that accompanies them are therefore extended indefinitely. The cyclical repetition of death rituals necessitates perpetual lament and is, in turn, reinforced by the unbroken presence of mourning in the household.

Electra's lament is just as corrupt and incorrect as the death rituals it responds to, a fact made clear by the close parallels between her ritual actions and her mother's. In fact, in many ways Clytemnestra represents a parallel or double for Electra.⁷⁸ For example, each woman is responsible for one of the two ongoing ritual conditions introduced at the beginning of the play. Just as Clytemnestra's permanent celebration of Agamemnon's death with monthly sacrifice and feasting is a disturbing fixed pattern, Electra's ceaseless lament is described in similar festal terms as *παννυχίδες*, all-night festivals (92). Both mother and daughter usurp the features of typical festival activities to cast Agamemnon's death in a certain light, each according to her own agenda.⁷⁹ The presentation of Electra's lament as

celebratory, festival activity is the first perverted ritual mentioned in the play, as Segal notes,⁸⁰ and this description, soon echoed in the presentation of Clytemnestra's ritual activity, establishes the pattern of corruption into which the remainder of the play's rituals will be organized.

The close parallels between mother and daughter mitigate the pity the audience will, of course, feel for Electra. Although her lament initially inspires compassion for her terrible circumstances, as the play progresses it becomes gradually clearer that the primary effect of this lament is not to generate pity in any straightforward manner. Rather, in the scheme of cyclical, repetitive, corrupt death ritual that drives the progression of the *Electra*'s plot, the lament that accompanies all this repetition serves as the most obvious sign of all that is wrong in this tragic household. Electra's forceful presence on stage and her insistent cries of lamentation give added prominence to the death ritual that inspires these cries. Her visceral weeping, repeated endlessly, sensitizes the audience to the less tangible patterns of ritual compulsion that overlay the plot, less tangible especially because these rituals are often performed offstage.⁸¹

Electra's lament, then, is superimposed on the more physical rituals of death that motivate the development of the plot, drawing attention to them and their repeating pattern. More than this, however, unlike real-life lament, a mere expression of the emotional tenor of the death rituals it accompanied, Electra's lament has agency in the play, perpetuating itself through its contagious nature.⁸² In the course of the play, she directly or indirectly drives nearly every person she encounters to take up her lament as well. Her ritual is not merely personally repetitive but also repetitive in the way it is transferred to others.⁸³ Her lament is largely her own in the first half of the play. It is not until the sorrow of Agamemnon's death has been compounded by the news that Orestes, too, is lost that other characters begin to succumb to the seductive draw of mourning. Lament is not merely a reflection of the fact that death ritual is occurring. Rather, lament in this play intensifies the sense of obligation that accompanies death ritual. Through the urgency of Electra's lament and its contagious effect, the audience is permitted to feel a measure of the heavy sense of obligation that drives the characters of the *Electra* to their various ritual actions.

The Chorus, who spends the most time in direct contact with Electra, is the first to give over to open lament. It engages in direct dialogue with her much more than the Choruses and actors of Sophocles' earlier plays, allowing a close emotional connection to develop between them.⁸⁴ In the choral dialogue of the prologue, the Chorus represents the emotional norm against which the extremity of Electra's grief can be appreciated, though even the stoic Chorus is pulled temporarily into her emotional sphere when it talks about the details of Agamemnon's death.⁸⁵ In

spite of the fact that the women of Mycenae caution her against the extremity of her emotions, however, even this sensible Chorus cannot deny her motivations.⁸⁶ In the *kommos* that follows the news of the chariot crash, the Chorus once again attempts to restrain Electra's cries and is not only once again unsuccessful but is actually drawn to share her emotional state. As Goldhill suggests, "The *kommos* as a ritual is designed to unite a community in grief and re-organize the community around a loss, and to reintegrate the mourners into the community. But here the group of women end up beholden to the individual: the power of Electra's misery holds sway."⁸⁷ The Chorus thus comes to be identified fully with Electra and her determination to seek vengeance. It is through shared lament that the Chorus is eventually persuaded to support fully the revenge plot that perpetuates the cycle of corrupt death and death ritual. Electra's influence on the Chorus is a preview of the effect her lament will later have on Orestes.⁸⁸

Chrysothemis, however, is the next to come under the spell of Electra's lament. When she arrives to report that she has found offerings on Agamemnon's tomb that she believes to have been placed by Orestes, Electra allows her to describe what she has seen but immediately afterward tells her the messenger's news that Orestes is dead. Robbed of her joy, Chrysothemis is compelled to share Electra's misery, echoing her sister's response to Orestes' death (οἶμοι τάλαινα at 788, 883, 1143) with her own cries of οἶμοι τάλαινα (926, 930). Chrysothemis becomes a new Electra, driven to take up the role of lamenter that she has so far resisted in order to stay on good terms with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (330–40). Moreover, while Chrysothemis is too meek and timid to take an active role in the revenge plot, she is persuaded, against character, to support her sister's bold decision to take vengeance into her own hands by keeping Electra's secret from the usurpers (1009–12).

Orestes, too, becomes entangled in Electra's lament. Although he is often presented as a man of action in contrast to the passive Electra,⁸⁹ a great deal of his revenge plot is dependent on words, which, Sarah Nooter argues, makes him vulnerable to Electra.⁹⁰ When the two siblings finally meet and he listens to her lament for the brother she thinks is dead, he is overcome with pity and, as he describes it, can no longer control his tongue (1175). He proceeds to fill the stage with the standard cries of lament that have characterized her speech in many scenes of this play: φεῦ (1174, 1183) and οἶμοι (1179). As he questions his sister about her life, his shift from measured iambics into emotional lyrics offers a clear sign that he has been drawn from his own world of logic and action into Electra's emotional reality.⁹¹ His distress is genuine as he hears of the indignities that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have imposed on her and of how his fabricated death has robbed her of all hope. The way in which Electra informs Orestes of what has

been happening in his absence makes him feel the full weight of the perversion and pollution of his family home and, efficiently untangling the layers of deceit that overlay the exchange between brother and sister, causes him to reveal his true identity to her.⁹² Through contact with his sister, Orestes immediately grasps the terrible consequences of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus' rule. As a result, unlike his Aeschylean and Euripidean counterparts, this Orestes finds sufficient motive to kill Clytemnestra in his sister's suffering alone and does not need further convincing to carry the grim deed to fulfillment.⁹³

Finally, both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus take up Electra's lament as they mourn not for her misfortunes but for their own. As Clytemnestra and Aegisthus face death, they utter the same cries that Electra has herself uttered and caused others to utter throughout the play, highlighting the way in which lament is an integral part of the self-perpetuating ritual cycle that dominates the play's action. Clytemnestra cries αἰᾶ (1404) and ὄμοι (1415, 1416) in the throes of death. More explicitly repetitive is her cry of οἴμοι τάλαινα (1409), which echoes both Electra and Chrysothemis. As Nicole Loraux suggests, Clytemnestra takes up the cry that Electra no longer has any reason to utter.⁹⁴ Aegisthus, too, takes up the lament when he realizes that he has been deceived and death is near. He cries οἴμοι twice (1475, 1479), and, significantly, he laments that he is lost (ὄλωλα, 1482), an exact repetition of Electra's cry when she is first told of Orestes' death (674). Even if these connections are extremely subtle, Sophocles does not permit the audience to forget that these new lamentations for the victims of sacrificial death grow directly out of older laments. Immediately following Clytemnestra's death, the Chorus sings:

τελοῦσ' ἀραί· ζῶσιν οἱ
γὰρ ὑπαὶ κείμενοι.
παλῖρρυτον γὰρ αἶμ' ὑπεξαιροῦσι τῶν
κτανόντων
οἱ πάλαι θανόντες.

(1417–21)

[The curses are fulfilled. Those who lie beneath the ground are living. For those who died long ago are draining the blood of their killers, which flows in retribution.]

That these laments are but a new iteration of a much older cycle is completely clear.

The only potentially mitigating factor in the otherwise perfect alignment between Electra's lament and the rituals that constitute the play's action is the fact

that even though the rituals clearly continue unabated throughout the drama, her staunch lament appears to falter not once but twice. Lament continues through other characters, as we have seen, but in a play that is so strongly focused on this central character, it is necessary to understand why her lament comes to an end—if indeed it does. In fact, in both cases the apparent end of lament is illusory, and Electra's mourning persists as strongly as ever.

The first time she appears to stop is in her second scene with Chrysothemis, who brings the news of the offerings on Agamemnon's grave. Electra convinces her sister that she is wrong about their meaning and that Orestes really is dead. She immediately attempts to persuade Chrysothemis to join in a hastily conceived murder plot against Aegisthus. Electra seems to be telling her that simply lamenting her lot in life is of no use; action is called for:

ἢ πάρεστι μὲν στένειν
 πλούτου πατρώου κτῆσιν ἐστερημένη,
 πάρεστι δ' ἀλγεῖν ἐς τοσόνδε τοῦ χρόνου
 ἄλεκτρα γηράσκουσιν ἀνυμμέναί τε.
 καὶ τῶνδε μέντοι μηκέτ' ἐλπίσης ὅπως
 τεύξει ποτ'· οὐ γὰρ ὧδ' ἄβουλός ἐστ' ἀνὴρ
 Αἰγισθος ὥστε σὸν ποτ' ἢ κάμὸν γένος
 βλαστεῖν ἐᾶσαι, πημονὴν αὐτῷ σαφῇ.
 ἀλλ' ἦν ἐπίσπῃ τοῖς ἐμοῖς βουλευμασιν,
 πρῶτον μὲν εὐσέβειαν ἐκ πατρός κάτω
 θανόντος οἴσῃ τοῦ κασιγνήτου θ' ἅμα·

(959–69)

[It is possible for you to lament, being deprived of the possession of your father's wealth, and it is possible for you to feel pain that for so long you have grown older without husband or marriage. And you shouldn't hope to get these things anymore. For Aegisthus is not so foolish a man as to allow your stock or mine to grow, which would be a clear source of trouble for him. But if you adopt my counsels, then for the first time you will know the pious character of our dead father below and our brother.]

Electra's newfound determination suggests that Orestes' death may finally have provided sufficient stimulus to interrupt her cyclical lament. This determination is, however, short-lived and must of necessity be short-lived. No matter how clear-headedly Electra may plan for the murder of her oppressors, the apparent death of Orestes demands funeral rituals, which will, inevitably, prompt yet more lament.

Her desire to exact revenge represents a brief and temporary postponement of her lament, not a resolution of its root cause or a substitute for it. The moment she is confronted with the urn she believes to contain her brother's ashes, a reminder of the funeral rituals she is obliged to perform, she is once again consumed by grief and returns to the same patterns of lament that she has embraced throughout the play, all thoughts of murder erased (1115–16). That Electra's emotional state remains unaltered is made clear by the fact that when she resumes her lamentation for her brother, her ongoing grief for Agamemnon's loss is explicit (οἴχεται πατήρ, 1151).

Electra's mournful countenance once again seems to falter after the recognition of her brother. So extreme is her joy that Orestes fears her cries will betray them (1271–72). As the siblings lay plans for vengeance against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, he counsels her to hide her joy with false sorrow so that their mother will not suspect his ruse (1296–99). Her response is telling. She assures him that he will not see her smiling because she is still gripped by hatred for their mother and because, having seen Orestes both alive and dead in a single day, she can never stop weeping for him (1309–15). Even the realization of all she has hoped for, Electra declares, will not put an end to her incessant weeping. Though her ritual obligation to mourn and care for Orestes' ashes is now removed, the ritual obligation she feels for her father remains and is, as ever, an incitement to grief. Moreover, the joy that she feels at having her brother back cannot quell her deep-seated hatred for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the very people who impede Agamemnon's proper funeral. Hate and joy are not easily separated in Electra, and while joy is prominent in this scene, hatred will predominate in the *exodos*.⁹⁵

As for Electra's continued weeping, Mark Ringer perceptively points out that the actor's mask would likely have shown signs of Electra's grief and could not be changed in the course of the play. Her declaration that she can never stop weeping is appropriately reflected in the mask she wears.⁹⁶ The unchanging mask is a superficial reason for her continued grief, but Ringer's observation reveals how such superficial constraints of staging nonetheless point to a deeper truth. Electra is, fundamentally, a character in mourning, and the events of this play do not change that. Her hatred for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus stems directly from the corrupt and incomplete death rituals that they continue to use to dishonor Agamemnon's memory. Because the corrupt rituals are ongoing and the incomplete rituals remain incomplete at the end of the play, the imperative to weep is never actually removed, and Mycenaean society is never restored to structure from its state of *communitas*. As a result, even Electra's joy is expressed in tears.⁹⁷ Her joy at Orestes' return is overwhelmed by sorrow, just as her triumph at the end of the play is overwhelmed by anger and grief. Whatever gestures toward joy are made in this play, they cannot overcome the weight of the lament and grieving that grip the House of Atreus.

The rituals that demand lament continue to demand it even as the play reaches its conclusion.

The End?

The ending of the *Electra*, as Aegisthus and Orestes squabble over the exact location of Aegisthus' imminent death, has generated more discussion than perhaps any other part of the play. Sophocles' choice to end the play before the action is complete, with something about to happen inside the *skene*, is unparalleled in extant tragedy.⁹⁸ As Ringer notes, the Chorus literally has to tell the audience that this is, in fact, the ending, though it flies in the face of convention.⁹⁹ The oddity of the conclusion has generated a great deal of discussion about its correct interpretation. Many argue that it is definitively positive and triumphant, usually relying on the premise that the matricide is justified in moral terms.¹⁰⁰ The argument that the ending is unequivocally negative is less common.¹⁰¹ Most numerous by far, and rightly so, are those who read as ambiguous both the ending and what this ending implies about the future. Some focus on the duality of the conclusion, the juxtaposition of victory and its high moral cost, and the uncomfortable similarity between the usurpers and the avengers.¹⁰² Others emphasize the absence of a clear moral judgment of Orestes' actions in the form of the authoritative intervention of Apollo, the Furies, or Athena, as in Aeschylus' telling of the myth.¹⁰³ Yet others focus on the way in which Sophocles constructs the ending so as to discourage his audience from speculating about the future and the real consequences of Orestes' and Electra's actions.¹⁰⁴ And some simply stress that Sophocles allows his audience no way of knowing what will happen next.¹⁰⁵

As we have seen, contributing to the ambiguity of the final scene is the way in which Orestes' answer to Electra's query as to whether all is well calls into question Apollo's commands and robs the siblings of the definitive moral upper hand.¹⁰⁶ Apollo's instructions are distant at this point in the play and, because of the ambiguous nature of Orestes' answer, fail to give the audience a reliable way of assessing Electra and Orestes' present actions.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the play has been dominated by Electra's perspective, not that of Apollo or even his agent, Orestes. In fact, the play deliberately separates Apollo and Electra, which further diminishes the god's importance for the audience's assessment of what happens in the *exodos*.¹⁰⁸ Even though Apollo instigates the vengeance plot, he foresees no explicit role for Electra in it, an omission that makes it even more difficult to assess the matricide as an act of Apollo, since the audience experiences the murder from her perspective as the fulfillment of her revenge fantasy.¹⁰⁹ The audience is therefore denied the assurance of divine justice at the end of the play and must make do with imperfect human

judgment.¹¹⁰ The loss of Apollo's divine guidance at so critical a juncture is, in a sense, an inverted *deus ex machina*. Rather than arriving at the last moment to give meaning and moral sanction to an otherwise impossible situation, Apollo and his moral guidance are conspicuously missing at the end of the play. My contention is that the clearly established pattern of ritual repetition in this drama usurps the role a *deus ex machina* might otherwise play in informing the audience's understanding of the ending and generating expectations about the future beyond the close of the play. In spite of Apollo's quiet presence behind the scenes, the play implies that his commands ultimately serve a larger ritual obligation, one over which he appears to have as little control as the humans caught up in the same cycle.

Since no god appears to the characters to reveal their future at the end of the *Electra*, I suggest that the audience's expectations will naturally be shaped by the closest thing to a divine prophecy provided in the *exodos*: namely, the cumulative effect of the repetitive ritual patterns that have instigated nearly everything that has occurred in the play. Examining this play from the perspective of ritual certainly supports an ambivalent reading of the ending. Unlike many critics, however, I argue that the ritual perspective focuses the audience's attention not on the unknown but rather on what is known. The idea that Sophocles neither wants nor allows the audience to see the future beyond the end of the drama is not supported by the events of the play; indeed, the *Electra* practically forces its audience to think about the future with Orestes' clearly stated intention of killing Aegisthus at the same hearth where Agamemnon was killed.¹¹¹ While an audience might also think about the vengeful Furies awaiting Aeschylus' Orestes, as Ivan Linforth believes Sophocles expected his audience to do,¹¹² the *Electra* itself stresses the certainty of Aegisthus' death and the inauguration of a new phase in the cycle of ritual repetition that has defined Sophocles' version of this myth.

What remains uncertain is how the survivors, particularly Electra and Orestes, will respond to this new ritual obligation. It is certainly possible that the siblings will go on to provide Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with pious, correct funerary rites. Each new iteration of the cycle of death and death ritual brings with it the possibility that, this time, ritual attention will be given completely and correctly. This possibility is primarily what makes the ending of the *Electra* so ambiguous. However, based on what the audience knows, based on the patterns of repetition and reciprocity that have been established in this play, and based on the vindictive and savage behavior in which nearly all of its characters, and especially Electra and Orestes, have been implicated, the audience has every reason to expect the siblings to mistreat the corpses. Further, Sophocles' reminder that Aegisthus and Clytemnestra have had children together (589) strengthens the foreshadowing of further

impiety and vengeance. The play has shown what ritual prompts children to do in response to the corrupt death of a parent. Whether now or at some point in the future, the audience must feel almost certain that revenge, in the form of corrupt death or death ritual, is inevitable. Electra's claim that Aegisthus' death will bring resolution (1464) is contradicted by myriad examples over the course of the play of the failure of death ritual to offer closure.

In her article about the endings of Sophoclean plays, Deborah Roberts expresses an important truth about tragedy: "Sophocles' plays suggest . . . that there *are* natural endings to tragic actions and to tragedies, and that tragedies may even be concluded happily, with victory, or with healing, or with grace. But the forces that set tragedies in motion continue unabated, and stories, though they may be serious and complete, are always parts of larger stories."¹¹³ In other words, whenever the playwright chooses to bring the play to an end, that ending is always to some extent artificial and contingent. The same tragic forces that have inspired most of what occurs in the play still exist and continue to act on the characters, even though the spectators do not witness the results.

Through the dynamics of ritual repetition, Sophocles makes the persistence of such tragedy a near certainty in the *Electra*. At its conclusion, the most likely trajectory of events after the end of the drama is totally clear. There is, of course, tension between the familiar and definitive ending that Aeschylus' *Eumenides* forces upon this Pelopidean strife and the open-ended but no less definite future that Sophocles signals by ritual means. Aeschylus' telling of this story achieves closure only by embracing the unlikely and the unpredictable. Stepping out of their usual tacit roles as enforcers of ritual probity, the gods in this play, particularly Apollo and Athena, act unpredictably by sanctioning ritual corruption: namely, the ritualized murders of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia. Circumventing the usual rules guiding ritual behavior, their improbable resolution to the irresolvable problems of mortals involves instead the unpredictable workings of a new and untried human court of law. Sophocles, by contrast, treats this story with pragmatic realism. In his play, the gods are not presented as willing to compromise on ritual corruption, as Apollo and Athena are in the *Eumenides*. The way in which Apollo in particular fades from the end of Sophocles' *Electra* without explicitly endorsing the matricide or its ritual corruption preserves the possibility that Electra and Orestes may yet be punished for their ritual improprieties just as Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have been. Without the direct intervention of the gods to suggest otherwise, Sophocles' play implies that the normal rules of ritual engagement still apply. And since his play has been nothing if not a detailed illustration of those ritual forces, stretching from the murders of Oenomaus and Myrtilus down the generations to the great-grandchildren of Pelops, the audience is afforded a clear view of what is likely to happen next. By

means of the ritual actions of the characters of the *Electra*, Sophocles establishes clearly the permanence of revenge in response to death and its rituals and leaves the audience with little doubt about the future.

While Aeschylus' resolution offers the more hopeful view of human community, suggesting that the gods can bring about improbable solutions to otherwise impossible scenarios, Sophocles' appeal to the permanence of ritual-driven vengeance was almost certainly more closely aligned with the actual experiences and beliefs of his Athenian audience. In the sixth century, Solon enacted laws to restrict the more extravagant aspects of funerary ritual, quite likely with the intent of mitigating this incitement to aristocratic feuding and vengeance politics in *stasis*-ridden Athens. The fact that such laws are believed to have been largely ineffective in changing or even curbing the essential nature of death rituals and the fact that new legislation reinforcing the initial laws had to be passed periodically in the decades that followed¹¹⁴ confirms the widespread influence and persistence of the ritual dynamic that motivates the development of the plot in Sophocles' *Electra*. Through the principles of ritual poetics, Sophocles' play illustrates how the cyclicity of corrupt sacrificial death and death ritual both communicates and perpetuates the permanent state of *communitas* in which the House of Atreus exists and thereby determines his audience's reception and expectations of the plot. That ritual lament continues to inspire cyclical family vengeance in the modern folk laments of the Mani of rural Greece¹¹⁵ lends support to Sophocles' apparent belief in the enduring capacity of death ritual to incite further death.

So far, I have considered the dramatic impact of rituals that go wrong because of problems with the actual performance of the ritual in question. Different ritual elements may become confused, corruptions in the ritual may forestall ritual closure, or the ritual may simply remain incomplete, requiring new ritual attention. In the next chapter, I consider a different type of ritual problem. Through the *Philoctetes*, I explore the dramatic consequences of rituals that are performed correctly and in their entirety but by participants who do not have the necessary status to render their ritual actions legitimate.

4 Ritual Status in the *Philoctetes*

τί χρὴ με . . . ἐν ξένῳ ξένον / στέγειν ἢ τί λέγειν . . .

[What must I hide or what must I say, stranger that I am
in a strange land?]

Phil. 135–36

Rituals performed by characters who lack the necessary status for ritual participation, a phenomenon that can manifest in many ways (see chapter 1), generate tension between the ritual effect of the characters' actions and their dramatic effect. The rituals themselves are invalid because their participants lack legitimacy in some way; the contemporary audience would not have expected these characters to benefit, suffer, or uphold obligations on the basis of their participation in the rituals. At the same time, however, such rituals proceed correctly through all three phases of van Gennep's rite of passage. As a result, the mere observation of these rituals also generates the dramatic expectation of benefit, punishment, or obligation as appropriate to the ritual, shaping the way in which the audience expects the play to unfold. Observing these rituals, the audience would experience a certain cognitive dissonance between the ritual expectation that the rituals will fail and the dramatic expectation that they will succeed.

These competing expectations are determined by two kinds of knowledge. First, an audience familiar with actual fifth-century ritual practices could recognize, even if the characters do not, when, on the basis of inappropriate ritual status, the rituals cannot be expected to produce legitimate results. Second, knowledge about the mythical canon would allow them to foresee where the plot should be headed and identify whether onstage rituals align with or depart from this tradition. In

this respect, the audience are afforded a quasi-divine perspective. Unlike the characters, who have simplistic and usually incorrect expectations that their ritual actions will have valid outcomes and are unable to foresee the future clearly, the audience perceives the action onstage with an almost divine degree of foresight.

Indeed, the audience's ritual and mythical knowledge allows it to recognize what is required to bring the story back into alignment with the mythical canon. In Sophocles, the problematic rituals themselves usually suggest the solution to the audience's divergent ritual and dramatic expectations: namely, the correction of the characters' status problems. Typically, the audience's ritual and mythical expertise allows it to perceive that the events of the play would realign with the mythical tradition if the characters possessed the ritual status necessary for their ritual actions to be effective. As a result, in plays where the main characters are affected by problems of ritual status, dramatic closure and the acquisition of ritual status are closely connected.

The *Philoctetes*, though it contains less overt ritual than the other plays of Sophocles, models a sophisticated use of rituals that involve status problems in the construction of its plot. The entire drama is built around the relationship between two characters who lack ritual status or, to put it differently, lack the legitimate place in Greek society necessary to render their ritual actions legitimate in the eyes of that society. One is Neoptolemus, a youth who has not yet joined adult citizen-soldier society; the other is Philoctetes, an exile whose former status in that same society has been revoked. Both are excluded from the community of adults who can legitimately participate in the rituals of Greek society, and this has a dampening effect on the play. In one sense, no ritual outcome can be expected of the ritual actions these characters undertake, as the audience's knowledge of ritual propriety makes clear.

On the other hand, the audience's perception of this play and of the relationship between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes is equally determined by their mythical knowledge. At the beginning of the play, Neoptolemus is tasked with bringing Philoctetes to join the war effort at Troy, despite the fact that the Greeks abandoned Philoctetes on the deserted island of Lemnos ten years earlier. The mythical tradition states that Philoctetes did go to Troy with Neoptolemus and played a crucial role in the destruction of the city. The audience, therefore, will expect that the ritual actions Neoptolemus undertakes, in particular the supplication and oath rituals that strengthen his relationship with Philoctetes and facilitate the goal of bringing the exile to Troy, will succeed in spite of the status problems that affect both of the characters implicated. In this respect, the play conforms to the pattern demonstrated in the other Sophoclean plays in which ritual status is integral to the plot. In the *Philoctetes*, as in the *Trachiniae* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* as discussed

in chapter 1, part of the dramatic effect of rituals that incorporate problems of status is to suggest that the correction of these status problems would not only render the rituals themselves legitimate but would also lead to the appropriate mythical outcome. The rituals of the *Philoctetes* specifically intimate that if Neoptolemus and Philoctetes did have legitimate status in the Greek army, their supplications and oaths would contribute to a future in which both men fight at Troy.

In comparison with other Sophoclean plays, the *Philoctetes* presents a much richer and more complicated exploration of the issue of ritual status and its poetic potential in the construction of both plot and character. This richness and complexity is achieved through the play's setting, which confers an unusual degree of isolation on the characters' interactions and thus distances them from the various kinds of authority that typically enforce normative ritual rules. First, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes experience social isolation, separated from the Greek army because both lack membership in this elite community. They exist at a distance from the restrictions and pressures of social belonging, the compulsion to obey Greek societal rules weakened by their exclusion from the Greeks' social contract. The voices of Greeks with status in this play, including Neoptolemus' sailor companions and Odysseus, lack the authority they would have in the presence of the rest of the Greek army, at least insofar as they attempt to cajole or force Neoptolemus or Philoctetes to adopt any given course of action. There is a sense that in the context of this play, the two characters without full status have some freedom to act without taking into account the normal strictures imposed by Greek society.¹ Although the audience is regularly reminded that the ritual agreements and obligations the characters undertake cannot be recognized by the Greeks at Troy, the play implies that they might have some validity so long as Neoptolemus and Philoctetes remain sequestered in their society of two.

Social isolation is reinforced by geographic isolation. The events of the *Philoctetes* unfold on the deserted island of Lemnos, a location whose remoteness is almost unparalleled in extant Greek tragedy.² This physical distance from the Greeks reinforces the impression that the normal rules of Greek society are more difficult to enforce. Apart from Odysseus and a few sailors, the Greeks remain effectively unreachable. Not only are Philoctetes and Neoptolemus not a part of the Greek army, but they would have to undertake a long journey by sea before their integration into that group could even be considered. Moreover, in contrast to the *Philoctetes* plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles' Lemnos is uninhabited.³ Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are therefore distant not just from the Greeks at Troy but from every society. Their interactions take place in the most primitive state of nature on an island where "eat or be eaten" appears to be the only fixed rule.⁴ In this context, the audience is given the impression that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes might be

able to create their own social rules, literally insulated from the compulsion to conform to the expectations of others.

Finally, in addition to social and geographical isolation, Lemnos is isolated in a religious sense. Normally the gods would guarantee the results of ritual actions, since the characters in Sophoclean tragedy always perform rituals in the gods' names and call on the gods to punish those who neglect their ritual obligations. The gods are silent in this play. So far as the events of the drama suggest, no god pays any attention to the characters' ritual requests or enforces the ritual obligations they incur until Heracles arrives at the end of the play to overturn the ritual agreements Philoctetes and Neoptolemus have negotiated. In fact, one of the first things that the audience is told is that the mere presence of Philoctetes makes ritual communication with the divine impossible (8–11), which implies that the *charis* that defines the relationship between gods and men is lacking on Lemnos. The island, as Segal points out, is not merely uninhabited but also lacking in temples, altars, and worship of any kind.⁵ Lemnos is characterized by an absence of the divine in much the same way that it is characterized by an absence of civilized community. The gods still exist, just as Greek society continues to exist offstage, but they are distant and remote and do not respond immediately to ritual events that take place on the island. This appears to offer the characters onstage a degree of freedom from the usual rules governing the relationship between men and gods. They seem aware of this to some extent,⁶ but the greater impact is on the audience's perception of what transpires on the stage. The awareness that the gods are in some sense absent from Lemnos amplifies the audience's sense of its own divine perspective. The gods' absence creates scope for theatrical thought experiments founded on the possibility that, within the parameters of the drama, an audience might accept as legitimate ritual actions that the real gods would not.

In three ways, then—socially, geographically, and religiously—the isolation of Lemnos is more extreme than is usual in Greek tragedy. In shielding Neoptolemus and Philoctetes from social and divine scrutiny in this way, the play opens up dramatic possibilities where the characters' ritual actions are concerned. As is always the case with rituals in which the participants lack the necessary status, ritual actions in this play create tension between the ritual expectation that they will fail and the dramatic expectation that they will succeed. However, the isolated conditions of Lemnos invite the audience to be bolder in its theatrical suspension of disbelief, more open to the possibility of ritual outcomes that the normal rules of ritual engagement speak against. While the audience will be aware that the supplication and oath rituals in which Philoctetes and Neoptolemus engage are invalid by the normal rules of social engagement, the setting of Lemnos strengthens the possibility that these rituals might have some degree of validity because they are performed

not in the context of Greek society but in the isolated micro-society that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus create between themselves. In other Sophoclean plays, rituals affected by status problems suggest that competing ritual and dramatic expectations could be resolved if the characters' status problems were corrected. In the *Philoctetes*, the isolation of Lemnos opens the possibility that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus might actually be able to achieve resolution through their ritual actions in spite of their status problems specifically because they undertake them in near-complete isolation.

Neoptolemus and Philoctetes appear to respond to the permissiveness of the environment in which they find themselves, which ultimately reveals the futility of this Lemnian experiment. Philoctetes takes advantage of the absence of the other Greeks, who might question his ritual actions, in order to manipulate Neoptolemus, whom he successfully pressures to uphold a ritual oath commitment the boy never undertook. As for Neoptolemus, it eventually becomes clear that he lacks an adult understanding of ritual rules. Not only is he too inexperienced to recognize the inappropriateness of Philoctetes' demands; he also commits a ritual error in leaving Philoctetes' second suppliant request unanswered. These ritual problems, clearly linked to Philoctetes' exile and Neoptolemus' youth, bring the play to an apparent ending as the characters agree to sail together—not for Troy but rather for Philoctetes' home near Mount Oeta. While the cumulative dramatic effect of the correctly performed rituals continues to suggest some kind of ritual obligation between the two despite their status problems, ritual and dramatic criteria converge at this point to communicate that this proposed ending cannot be the play's true ending. It violates ritual propriety, since it is based on faulty rituals performed by participants lacking correct status; it also violates the mythical tradition, since it precludes Neoptolemus and Philoctetes' participation in the Trojan War. Moreover, even though the lax ritual environment on Lemnos has allowed the play to reach this juncture, this proposed conclusion requires that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus leave the island's protective isolation. For the first time in the play, the audience's ritual and dramatic expectations point to the same conclusion, united in their insistence that the play cannot end at this moment and highlighting the fact that it is ritual status problems that preclude resolution.

The *Philoctetes* tests the boundaries of what is ritually possible by staging an extended thought experiment on Lemnos, yet this first, false ending confirms that poetic closure is unattainable under the conditions in which the play has been unfolding. While the agreements Neoptolemus and Philoctetes have reached on Lemnos may have validity there, and while they establish a lasting obligation between the two, it is evident that beyond the shores of the island these rituals will be meaningless to anybody else, as Odysseus' dismissive derision makes clear. The

ending that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes propose will effect only a change of setting rather than an actual solution to the dilemma the play poses, as the Greeks' attempts to bring Philoctetes to Troy play out at Mount Oeta in the future rather than on Lemnos. At the same time, the play makes it clear that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus cannot remain on Lemnos. Having tested the other possibilities, the provocative suggestion of a ritually and mythically problematic ending to the play demonstrates that the only way to satisfy the audience's ritual and dramatic expectations is for both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes to achieve the ritual status that would appease both the Greeks and the gods, whose perspectives the audience to some extent share. Since this is not possible in the isolated environment of Lemnos, the audience will expect some form of external intervention to facilitate a departure from Lemnos that addresses these status problems.

And, indeed, the arrival of Heracles *ex machina* soon belies the first, false ending and, by foretelling the way in which each man will gain status within the Greek army, shows how the tension between the audience's ritual and dramatic expectations can at last be resolved. Closure in this play is tied to the anticipation, if not the actual acquisition, of appropriate status for both problematic characters. Heracles' arrival bridges the distance between Lemnos and the rest of the world, anticipating the transcendence of the social, geographic, and religious isolation that has defined Philoctetes' existence there. The demigod's presence reaffirms the various rules that have been, at best, provisional on Lemnos and shows characters and audience alike how both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes will be capable of upholding them. Reassured that, in the future, the two will act in accordance with normative social and ritual rules, the audience comes to understand how the resolution of the play's central conflict is now possible. Much as in the *Trachiniae* (see chapter 1), Sophocles does not stage the resolution of the *Philoctetes*' central problem, but he does allow the audience to foresee how resolution will be possible beyond the bounds of the drama.

In what follows I first consider the factors that make Neoptolemus' and Philoctetes' statuses problematic, invalidating their supplications and oaths according to normal societal rules. It is important to lay out these problems in some detail, since it is by consistently referring to them that the play primarily shapes the audience's perception of what transpires onstage and their expectations as to what will happen next. I then show how these problems of status determine the ritual and dramatic effect of the various ritual actions in which Neoptolemus and Philoctetes participate on Lemnos, focusing on two requests that Philoctetes makes of Neoptolemus and, in each case, the supplication and oath rituals that formalize both the request and the youth's response. Finally, I turn to the *deus ex machina* and investigate how a ritual-oriented approach both helps to articulate why the first

ending is not a true ending and sheds new light on the resolution offered by the surprising appearance of Heracles.

Problems of Ritual Status

The Status of Neoptolemus

Neoptolemus' lack of ritual status is clearly tied to his youth and the simple fact that he has not yet been fully initiated into adult society, represented in this play by the Greek army. The audience must therefore expect that the Greeks will not see as legitimate and binding the solution he reaches with Philoctetes through ritual negotiations. His youth is communicated by references to aspects of youth initiation in fifth-century Athenian society, which encourage the audience to understand him as not yet having passed the milestones that would make him an adult hoplite citizen with the associated political privileges and responsibilities. Although his experiences on Lemnos have been said to represent very particular aspects of youth initiation, I take a broader approach in my consideration of his ritual status. No single initiatory experience in Athens, by itself, facilitated a youth's transition to adulthood; as Barry Strauss notes, "The Athenians had a keen awareness of the stages of a child's growth, and custom marked a number of transition points (some precise, others flexible) along the way."⁷ By considering allusions in the *Philoctetes* to the *ephebeia*, the ephebic oath, deme and phratry admission, and the festival of the Apatouria, I will show that all these allusions collectively undermine the legitimacy of the rituals Neoptolemus undertakes, without insisting on a single fifth-century analogue for his social, political, and ritual position.

Neoptolemus' position vis-à-vis the Greek army has most often been associated with the age category of ephebe and participation in the related *ephebeia*, a period of military training undertaken by an Athenian youth in anticipation of his joining the hoplite ranks with his fellow citizens. The best textual evidence for this institution is found in Aristotle (*Ath. Pol.* 42.1–5), who describes the scrutiny a boy underwent before he was granted ephebe status, the nature of the ephebe's training and military service, first at the Piraeus and later on the Attic frontier, and the very few legal activities from which the ephebe was not exempt (including, for example, questions of estate). According to Aristotle, the status of ephebe was conferred on a young man at the age of eighteen, provided it could be proved before the men of the deme that he was of age and the legitimate offspring of two Athenian citizens. Upon attaining ephebic status, a youth was officially registered as a member of his father's deme and, consequently, became a citizen of Athens and eligible for participation in the assembly, though, in practice, military training prevented the

ephebe from attending the assembly until that training was completed. He also immediately became his own *kurios*, legally entitled to represent himself in court and enter into binding contracts, but again, effectively, only after he returned to the *polis* after training.⁸ If Neoptolemus is to be understood as some kind of mythical equivalent for the historical ephebe, then he must be understood as a character who has attained full, adult status but does not yet have the opportunity to exercise it pending the completion of his training and subsequent reintegration into adult society.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet's essay "Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the *Ephebeia*" is the best-known statement of the argument that Neoptolemus' experiences on Lemnos mimic the ephebe's service on the frontier.⁹ He describes the *ephebeia* as a rite of passage that facilitated the transition from youth to adulthood, and his contention is that Neoptolemus actually becomes a full adult hoplite by the end of the play.¹⁰ He argues that Neoptolemus, like the Athenian ephebe, embraces the antihoplite principles of deceit, stealth, and savagery in order to move toward their opposites in adherence to the hoplite code of courage, loyalty, and civilized behavior. On the basis of the historical *ephebeia* and its association with the myth of Xanthos and Melanthos (an issue to which I will return), Vidal-Naquet identifies many elements of the ephebic frontier experience in Neoptolemus' Lemnian experience: the remote, wild location, the prominence of the motifs of hunting and ambush, the use of deceit, and the presence of an authority figure, in this case Odysseus, who prompts the youth to action and offers both military and moral guidance.

Certainly some aspects of the identity of the ephebe undergoing training fit Neoptolemus' circumstances and support Vidal-Naquet's well-known reading of the *Philoctetes*. The fact that some of his military duties kept the ephebe at a distance from the city mirrors Neoptolemus' mission to retrieve Philoctetes from remote Lemnos. Although the ephebe's first service was in the Piraeus, hardly a remote location, and Irene Polinskaya makes a persuasive argument that the historical evidence for Athens' frontier garrisons indicates no lack of civilization, as Vidal-Naquet's argument requires,¹¹ it is at least clear that an ephebe's duties would have kept him from most forms of social, political, and ritual (especially civic ritual) activity. Moreover, although the Athenian ephebe gained entry into the assembly by virtue of his new status (in practice, he would not attend until after his ephebic training), he was excluded by definition from most other forms of democratic participation. Athenians were not eligible to be jurors or legislators (*nomothetai*) or to hold office until at least the age of thirty.¹² Neoptolemus' youth similarly bars him from any kind of parallel political activity among the mythical Greeks, as Odysseus' unquestionable authority on matters relating to the interests of the Greek army reminds the audience. At least some characteristics of Athenian ephebic

training, therefore, are mirrored in Sophocles' presentation of Neoptolemus' experiences on Lemnos. If a fifth-century audience interpreted his status by reference to the *ephebeia*, they would understand him to be prevented by circumstance from participating in the social, political, and ritual activities of the Greek army.

This cannot be the final word on the *ephebeia*, however. There are many difficulties in Vidal-Naquet's argument, as has often been pointed out, relating both to his methodology¹³ and to the extent of the overlap he perceives between the *ephebeia* and Neoptolemus' experiences on Lemnos.¹⁴ Perhaps most problematic of these is the fact that the earliest secure evidence for the *ephebeia* as Aristotle describes it—a fixed period of border garrison military training for youths preparing to fight in the hoplite army for the first time—is from the fourth century, following the introduction of the law of Epicrates in 335/4 BCE (*Lycurg.* fr. 5.3, Conomis). It is certainly possible that the *ephebeia* existed in some form earlier than that, but the evidence we have makes it doubtful that this institution had been formalized as a garrison training experience when the *Philoctetes* was staged in 409 BCE.¹⁵ Thus, although Neoptolemus' experiences may have evoked hoplite training in some generic way, it seems unlikely that an Athenian audience would have perceived his time on Lemnos in the precise terms described by Aristotle. Consequently, it is difficult to draw specific conclusions about what that evocation of hoplite training would have suggested to the audience about Neoptolemus' formal progress toward full adult citizenship and its associated rights and obligations.

Although it is difficult to link the *Philoctetes* and Aristotle's *ephebeia* directly, however, the ephebic oath, which Aristotle does not mention, is more easily tied to the late fifth century. In this first oath that an Athenian youth was able to swear on his own, a newly minted ephebe gave assurance to his fellow citizens that he would defend his fatherland, its laws, and its gods as a hoplite soldier. Like the military training portion of the *ephebeia*, the text of the oath is attested for the first time in the fourth century.¹⁶ Yet even though we have no fifth-century text, there is strong evidence, significantly from tragedy, to suggest that the oath likely existed much earlier than the earliest surviving inscription. H. Y. McCulloch and H. D. Cameron offer a compelling argument that Aeschylus' *Septem*, performed in 467 BCE, presupposes knowledge of the oath in its audience, while Peter Siewert finds concepts and even specific phrases clearly linked to the known text of the ephebic oath in fifth-century literature from Aeschylus' *Persians* to Sophocles' *Antigone* to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.¹⁷ The oath, therefore, is one aspect of ephebic identity that likely would have been recognized by a fifth-century audience and might well have influenced its perception of Neoptolemus.

Vidal-Naquet discusses the ephebic oath as a promise that ephebes made to return to society after their initiatory military experience, marking the beginning

of a liminal period during which ephebes underwent the transformation that allowed them to reintegrate into society afterward as adult hoplites.¹⁸ If, however, the oath and the formal *ephebeia* were not yet linked in 409 BCE, the force of the oath and its implications for an audience's perception of Neoptolemus' status as youth or adult must be reevaluated. So far as can be determined from our sources, the ephebic oath was, in essence, an oath of citizenship. It defined the moment at which a youth ceased to be his father's dependent and gained legal autonomy because it was the moment at which he was able to swear an oath on his own behalf for the first time. When youths swore the ephebic oath, they had already been examined and found acceptable to swear it, in terms of both age and parentage. Immediately upon swearing the oath, the youths gained three new types of status and were inscribed in three registers: the register of their deme, the register of citizens, and the register of the assembly.¹⁹ No further ritual was required to cement their new ephebic status.²⁰ While the ephebic oath may or may not have been associated with the beginning of a formal period of military training in the late fifth century, it was certainly the ritual that marked the acquisition of a citizen's rights and responsibilities, including the obligation to serve in the hoplite army and the status necessary to partake in rituals as an adult.

Since in historical Athens the ephebic oath was the ritual mechanism by which young men gained ephebe and citizen status, the suggestion that Neoptolemus is presented as a sworn ephebe in the *Philoctetes* implies that he already possesses the equivalent status in the body that stands in for the Athenian citizenry in this play: that is, he holds full, adult membership in the Greek army. However, an overt reference to oath taking at the beginning of the *Philoctetes*, which evokes the ephebic oath, strongly suggests that he does not.²¹ As Odysseus introduces him to their shared mission to bring Philoctetes to Troy, he explains why Neoptolemus can talk to the exile, while Odysseus must keep himself hidden: "You did not sail under oath to anyone, nor under compulsion, nor as part of the first expedition; but it is not possible for me to deny any of these things" (σὺ μὲν πέπλευκας οὐτ' ἔνορκος οὐδενὶ / οὐτ' ἐξ ἀνάγκης οὔτε τοῦ πρώτου στόλου, / ἔμοι δὲ τούτων οὐδέν ἐστ' ἀρνῆσιμον, 72–74).

Of course, the oath to which Odysseus is referring is not the ephebic oath but rather the oath of Tyndareus, binding Helen's suitors to support the man who would become her husband. However, the parameters of the oath of Tyndareus offer suggestive parallels for the ephebic oath. Each oath marks those who swear it as part of a special group with special obligations and privileges. Neoptolemus, unlike most of the rest of the Greek army, is under no obligation to the Trojan expedition, just as those who had not yet sworn the ephebic oath were under no specific military or political obligation to Athens.²² Odysseus, after all, spends the

first 135 lines of the play persuading Neoptolemus to help the cause; he does not take the boy's participation in the Lemnian scheme for granted. And just as Neoptolemus did not gain the right to compete for Helen's hand in marriage, those not yet inscribed in the deme register were excluded from any right to participate in Athenian politics. That he is too young to have sworn the oath of Tyndareus is also, more generally, a reminder of his youth, especially in comparison with the experienced Odysseus and Philoctetes. Sophocles' Neoptolemus may be on the cusp of adulthood, but the early revelation that he is not sworn to support the Greek cause likens him to the unsworn Athenian youth. The analogous position of the proto-ephebe in historical Athenian society implies to the fifth-century audience that Neoptolemus, like those who had not yet sworn the ephebic oath, was not yet eligible to partake in the ritual and political life of the community as an adult.

In considering the implications of a reference to the ephebic oath, we must also consider the criteria used to determine whether a youth was eligible to swear it and the ritual context in which this determination was made. From this perspective, Neoptolemus' experience on Lemnos can be likened to the scrutiny to which a boy was subjected just before he was admitted into his father's deme and, consequently, swore the oath. However, it can equally be likened to the identical vetting a boy underwent before he was admitted into his father's phratry at the annual festival of the Apatouria, likely when he was around sixteen.²³ At phratry initiation it was necessary for a boy's father or legal guardian to swear on his child's behalf, in the presence of the men of the phratry, that the child was born of legally married citizen parents and was therefore fit for phratry membership.²⁴ The important distinction between phratry and deme admission was that the ritual for deme admission ultimately paved the way for the youth to swear his first oath, while for phratry admission the child required his father to participate in the ritual on his behalf. In both initiatory contexts, boys undergoing scrutiny were not yet specifically *epheboi* but rather a more generic category of not-yet-adults typically denoted by words like *pais*, *teknon*, and *meirakion*.²⁵

Perhaps the most important aspect of the scrutiny performed before deme and phratry entry, prior to the youth's acquisition of citizenship and ephebe status, was the examination of his parentage. In fact, a scholiast at Aristophanes' *Acharnians* 146 suggests that the name "Apatouria" is derived from *homopatoria*, making it the festival of shared kinship or fatherhood.²⁶ This theme is of particular relevance to the *Philoctetes* and strengthens my claim that Neoptolemus is as yet without ephebic or adult status and so not yet eligible to act in society as an adult. While his paternity is never actually in question in the play—the audience knows that he is the son of Achilles, and this fact is mentioned frequently—his metaphorical parentage,

whose example he will emulate, is one of the central concerns surrounding this character. As Hanna Roisman points out, although the *Philoctetes* is one of the few Attic tragedies that does not revolve explicitly around a family crisis, Sophocles has still incorporated family themes by making a young character in need of a father figure central to the play. Neoptolemus' story is largely defined by the competing claims of Odysseus and Philoctetes on his Achillean nature, and by his own choices where these clash, as they often do.²⁷

Both Odysseus and Philoctetes appeal to him in the name of his father. Because their appeals are so different—one urges him to deceive Philoctetes and help the Greeks, while the other urges honesty and desertion of the Greeks—one of Neoptolemus' ritual tasks in the play is, in metaphorical terms, to determine whether he is the son of Odysseus' conception of Achilles or Philoctetes'.²⁸ The identity of his figurative father remains equivocal throughout the play. At first Odysseus persuades him to participate in deceiving Philoctetes by appealing to him as Achilles' son (3–4, 50, 96), but Philoctetes uses the same strategy to persuade him to abandon Odysseus' mission (1066, 1284). When it seems that Neoptolemus has chosen to take Philoctetes' side, the exile praises him as living up to his father's example (1310–13). However, the reversal of this decision, prompted by the arrival of Heracles, is also brought about by an appeal to Neoptolemus as his father's son (1433). Throughout the play, he is torn between two father figures who compete for his loyalty. The fact that neither succeeds permanently in claiming the youth as his own to the definitive exclusion of the other is a metaphorical depiction of Neoptolemus' failure to pass deme or phratry scrutiny and so be confirmed as his father's son.

One might conclude that Heracles' intervention overcomes this impasse because he proposes a solution that resolves the play's competing images of Achilles into a single paternal role model that Neoptolemus can emulate to the satisfaction of both of his replacement father figures. In ritual terms, however, Heracles' arrival only anticipates the solution; it does not actually effect it. Part of the purpose of examining candidates at the Apatouria, as at the deme induction of new ephebes, was to publicly determine the youth's legitimate parentage, providing an opportunity for dissenting voices to contest his eligibility.²⁹ Since Heracles' pronouncements occur in the isolation of Lemnos, in the absence of the Greek army into which Neoptolemus is to be initiated, his affirmation as Achilles' son lacks official sanction. In ritual terms, therefore, Neoptolemus consistently fails to meet the most important criterion for phratry or deme admission: namely, public recognition as his father's son. This sends a clear signal that he is not yet an adult member of Greek society and, therefore, has not yet achieved the political, civic, and ritual self-determination that admission into these associations ultimately facilitated in historical Athens.

Neoptolemus' closest analogue in Athenian society, then—the figure whose characteristics would most influence a fifth-century audience's perception of him—is not necessarily the ephebe himself. It could also be a pre-ephebic youth, one about to be initiated into his deme or about to be entered on the register of his phratry. Deme initiation suits Neoptolemus' situation: just as he is expected to join the army at Troy immediately after leaving Lemnos, deme initiation was the last ritual barrier separating the youth from joining the hoplite ranks. There are also good reasons to see references to the phratry-specific Apatouria, however, one of which is the play's emphasis on Neoptolemus' father. Another prominent motif in the *Philoctetes* is deceit. While Vidal-Naquet identifies deceit as particularly associated with the ephebe and therefore deme initiation, it was actually more closely linked to a myth etiologically and etymologically connected with the Apatouria.³⁰ The myth in question describes a fabled conflict between Boeotia and Athens over the border between their territories. When the two sides confront each other, the Boeotian king, Xanthos, prepares to fight with the Athenian king's champion, Melanthos. As they are fighting, Melanthos accuses Xanthos of fighting unfairly because he has a companion at his side. When the Boeotian king turns to see who is standing with him, Melanthos uses this moment of distraction to deliver a fatal blow, gaining victory through trickery. The festival of the Apatouria was etymologically linked to this mythical *apate* in addition to its other etymological associations.³¹

It is not clear that the content of this myth was related to the events of the Apatouria in any overt way; indeed, the myth may be connected to the festival only by etymological association. However, if participants in phratry initiation were perceived to be predisposed to deceit,³² this certainly resonates with the pre-ephebic Neoptolemus, whose flirtation with deception in the *Philoctetes* would therefore underline his youthful, precitizen status. The play's prologue stages Odysseus' ultimately successful efforts to persuade his young companion that the only way to bring Philoctetes to Troy is by deception; persuasion and force, the tools of the adult politician and hoplite, will have no effect. Thus, from the beginning the young Neoptolemus is committed to engage in lying and dissembling. This is something that the adult citizen Odysseus, with his fixed place and reputation in adult Greek society, is incapable of doing in this instance because of his existing relationship with Philoctetes. The implication of Odysseus' recruitment of Neoptolemus to deliver lies to Philoctetes is that Neoptolemus is still of an appropriate age and level of experience to engage in dishonest dealings that are not possible and, by implication, not appropriate for his elder companion, despite Odysseus' well-known deceitful mythical persona. Indeed, Odysseus is constrained by the fact that Philoctetes will recognize him from their former encounter as members of the

same expeditionary force in their capacity as fully adult warriors; Neoptolemus, who has not yet been inducted into the Greek army as an adult member and is therefore unknown to Philoctetes, avoids this problem.

With this introduction, it is impossible to tell in the remainder of the play whether Neoptolemus is lying or sincere at any given moment, as many commentators have remarked.³³ For example, when Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes his “story” of how he was unfairly deprived of his father’s arms by the Greek army, the audience has no way of knowing which aspects are true and which fabricated to earn Philoctetes’ trust. There is enough truth woven into Neoptolemus’ account that it begins to seem plausible that he may not actually be Odysseus’ ally, even as the striking correspondences between Neoptolemus’ situation and Philoctetes’ suggest a fabricated tale, calculated to earn the exile’s trust.³⁴ A similar uncertainty surrounds Neoptolemus’ decision at the end of the play to accompany Philoctetes home rather than taking him to Troy, sinking the Greeks’ chances of success in the war. This unexpected capitulation has prompted every reaction among scholars, from firm conviction that Neoptolemus has had a change of heart and repented of his deception,³⁵ to deep skepticism and the assertion that he is simply prolonging his original deceit, to the belief that Sophocles has deliberately kept his audience in the same ignorance as Philoctetes himself.³⁶ This diversity of readings reflects the fact that the association established between Neoptolemus and deception at the beginning of the play is never definitively challenged. He displays throughout the drama the deceptive habits expected of a youth. This reinforces the impression established by other allusions to aspects of fifth-century youth initiation that he is not yet a full member of Greek society and, as such, is ineligible for full legitimate participation in adult society, including ritual participation.

I do not wish to make too strong a claim about the terms in which a fifth-century audience would have perceived Neoptolemus. The play’s setting, on a desert island in the distant mythical past, makes the identification of elements of specific initiation rites uncertain.³⁷ Moreover, the fact that our evidence for the *Apatouria*, the initiation of ephebes, and especially the *ephebeia* itself comes predominantly from fourth-century sources makes it problematic to claim that a fifth-century audience would necessarily have identified specifically fifth-century ritual elements in the *Philoctetes*. In all likelihood, that audience would have evaluated his ritual status implicitly, drawing on a hodgepodge of ritual associations with youth in fifth-century society. The fact that he is distanced from the Greek army and barred from participation in its political processes (a possible reference to the separation of the ephebe from the city during parts of his military training), the fact that he has not yet engaged in any oath (a possible reference to the ephebic oath, which conferred citizenship), the fact that the play problematizes his parentage

in metaphorical terms and never confirms it in front of the Greek army (a possible reference to the scrutiny of candidates for initiation at phratry and deme induction), and the fact that he engages in deceit (a possible reference to the myth used to explain the etymology of the Apatouria as based in *apate*)—all of these potentially color the audience's perception of this character. While Neoptolemus' exact status in fifth-century terms is unclear, it is also unimportant. What unifies these divergent perspectives is that they all lead to the conclusion that he is not yet a fully participating adult member of Greek society. Just like ephebes in training away from Athens and Athenian youths before they swore the ephebic oath, Neoptolemus is ineligible to partake in the adult social and political rituals of the Greek army, and this affects the audience's perception of the efficacy of his ritual actions throughout the play.

The Status of Philoctetes

Philoctetes' status is characterized very differently from that of Neoptolemus. For the youth, status is incipient. Although he has never enjoyed status as an adult, he is clearly headed in this direction and will surely assume the attendant rights and responsibilities in time. Philoctetes' status, by contrast, is defined retrospectively. He was once a full adult member of Greek society but has been stripped of that status, abandoned on Lemnos by Greek companions unwilling to tolerate his screams of pain and the perpetual stench of the wound he received while trespassing in the grove of Chryse. His geographic isolation serves as the tangible symbol of his corresponding social, political, and ritual isolation. The young Neoptolemus' status is institutional, guided by rules and precepts that apply to any youth of his age. The experienced Philoctetes' status is individual and exceptional.³⁸ Not only are there no fixed rules to guide his reintegration into Greek society, but, in fact, no such reintegration is even anticipated until the Greeks learn from the seer Helenus that they need him to bring about the fall of Troy. Unlike Neoptolemus, Philoctetes has no obvious path toward social and political inclusion.

Fifth-century benchmarks, therefore, are not helpful in understanding his ritual status in the same way that they are for Neoptolemus. Certainly, there are fifth-century *comparanda* for Philoctetes' situation, but it is much more difficult to draw explicit comparisons than in the case of, for example, the ephebic oath and the Apatouria that inform Neoptolemus' more generic circumstances. It has been suggested that Philoctetes' situation might be viewed through the lens of the fifth-century institution of ostracism, which overlaps with his circumstances to the extent that it also entailed a ten-year period of exile.³⁹ There are many problems with this comparison, however. Unlike Philoctetes' at-first-indefinite exile,

ostracism was institutionally limited to ten years, after which the exile was automatically reintegrated into the Athenian community. In addition, ostracism typically targeted extremely powerful and influential figures in society, not the likes of the pathetic, wounded Philoctetes, and it required a majority vote of an assembly quorum, in contrast to what Odysseus presents as the unilateral decision of the Atreidae to leave Philoctetes on Lemnos. Moreover, the practice of ostracism was discontinued in Athens after 415 BCE, six years before the production of the *Philoctetes*, perhaps decreasing the likelihood that an Athenian audience would have perceived the character in these terms.⁴⁰ If his situation did evoke the fate of the ostracized citizen for some in the fifth-century audience, which is certainly possible, the comparison would affirm his complete exclusion from participation in Greek society, just as the ostracized citizen was excluded from Athenian social, political, and ritual life.

It has also been suggested that Philoctetes represents a dramatic analogue for the historical Alcibiades, the brilliant young general who had defected first to Sparta, then to Persia, and was recalled to Athens a mere two years before the production of the *Philoctetes*.⁴¹ While, indeed, a fifth-century audience might have perceived Philoctetes in this light, the idiosyncrasies of Alcibiades' fraught relationship with Athens in the late stages of the Peloponnesian War offer the audience little guidance as to the exact nature of Philoctetes' relationship with the Greek army. As with the question of ostracism, the comparison suggests only somebody who at one point lost his eligibility to participate in the Athenian community and later regained it. By contrast with the specificity of the allusions to fifth-century institutions contributing to Neoptolemus' characterization, the fifth-century parallels that characterize Philoctetes confirm only in the most general sense that Philoctetes, as he appears in this play, does not enjoy the privileges of membership needed for his ritual and political actions to be recognized as legitimate by the Greek army.

Since fifth-century parallels provide only vague confirmation of Philoctetes' lack of status, we must consider his portrayal more abstractly. The word Sophocles uses most often to refer to his isolation is the adjective ἐρημος, "desolate," used no fewer than eight times to describe Philoctetes himself (228, 265, 269, 471, 487, 1018, 1070) and, once, the cave in which he lives (34).⁴² ἐρημος serves as a kind of shorthand for Philoctetes' ontological status and the way in which, even when he is in the presence of other people—as the play's plot entails—he remains alone. When offered the chance to regain his place in the Greek army, he refuses outright, not merely rejected by society but actively rejecting society in return. This condition has been described by Segal as an inability to exist in the medial, human space between beast and god.⁴³ And, indeed, attention to the portrayal of

Philoctetes in this play reveals that his character incorporates elements of both extremes—beast and god—in his existence on Lemnos. These hints of Philoctetes’ separation from the human condition continually remind the audience of his lack of status in Greek society and give them no reason to expect his efforts to engage in ritual activity with Neoptolemus to be successful or recognized by the Greeks more broadly.

On the one hand, Sophocles dramatizes Philoctetes’ lack of status by showing his affinity for the deserted island on which he lives and, especially, the beasts that inhabit it and have been, for many years, his only companions.⁴⁴ Although he expresses strong anger at having been abandoned, he also expresses an even stronger attachment to the place of his exile and a strange reluctance to leave it, as Lillian Feder has shown.⁴⁵ When he experiences his moment of greatest distress in the play, the discovery that Neoptolemus has been manipulating him with falsehoods, Philoctetes turns away from the people around him and toward the landscape, addressing the harbors, promontories, rocks, and animals instead (936–40).⁴⁶ His disappointment in humans is so profound, his sense of rejection so deep, amplified by the fact that Neoptolemus’ betrayal reiterates his original abandonment, that he refuses human society altogether and embraces the barren landscape.⁴⁷ So far from hearing Neoptolemus when he tries to speak of the help that Philoctetes owes the Greeks and the help he will receive from them in return, he distorts the principles of helping friends and harming enemies by applying them instead to his relationship with the animals of Lemnos.⁴⁸

ὦ πταναὶ θῆραι χαροπῶν τ’
 ἔθνη θηρῶν, οὓς ὁδ’ ἔχει
 χῶρος οὐρεσιβώτας,
 φυγᾶ μηκέτ’ ἀπ’ αὐλίων
 ἐλᾶτ’· οὐ γὰρ ἔχω χεροῖν
 τὰν πρόσθεν βελέων ἀλκάν,
 ὦ δύστανος ἐγὼ τανῦν.
 ἀλλ’ ἀνέδην—ὅδε χολὸς ἐρύκομαι,
 οὐκέτι φοβητὸς ὑμῖν—
 ἔρπετε, νῦν καλὸν
 ἀντίφονον κορέσαι στόμα πρὸς χάριν
 ἐμᾶς <γε> σαρκὸς αἰόλας.

(1146–57)

[O winged beasts and tribes of fierce beasts, whom this mountain-pastured place enfolds, no longer will you hurry in flight from your dwelling places.

For I do not have my hands' former strength of arrows, wretched man that I am now. But freely—for I am restrained in my lameness and no longer a source of fear to you—come, now it will be good to sate your mouths on the quivering of my flesh in reciprocal slaughter.]

His mutual debts with the birds and beasts of his exile and the reciprocal *charis* he shares with them rather than with the gods or with other people renders obsolete any obligations the Greeks might place on him. He privileges a ritual connection with mute animals even when offered full restoration to his former place in Greek society, a choice that emphasizes his lack of ritual status among the Greeks. That he chooses the wilderness over civilization is an implicit rejection of civilized community. His choices make it clear that the conventions that govern Greek interactions, including the rules governing ritual behavior, do not apply to him in his exile.

Philoctetes' affinity with animals is not solely a matter of choice; he also possesses innate animal qualities that stem from his wound. Sophocles first describes and then demonstrates how these qualities make participation in ritual activity impossible. The audience are told in the opening lines of the play that the Atreidae commanded Odysseus to abandon Philoctetes on Lemnos because his cries of pain prevented the army from making libations and sacrifices to the gods (8–11). From 731 onward, the audience is witness to a breathtaking display of these inhuman screams of agony. While modern critics often deemphasize or even overlook the significance of Philoctetes' wild outcry, both J. Ceri Stephens and Norman Austin stress that to an audience inured to the noise and mess of ancient Greek life, particularly the act of animal sacrifice, Philoctetes' screams, so violent and disruptive that they make even this loud messy ritual impossible, justify his abandonment.⁴⁹ Philoctetes, by virtue of his suppurating wound, is controlled by baser urges than the Greeks who have rejected his presence. This painful imperative, one against which Philoctetes cannot fight and one which renders him speechless and wild, likens him more to the victim of the sacrifice ritual than to its human participants. In his wretched condition, he is incapable of participating in ritual as a man. Indeed, far from craving participation in these human rites, he makes a point of reminding Odysseus that his presence will disrupt the Greeks' rituals. Reinforcing his refusal to accompany Odysseus to Troy, he asks, "If I sail with you, how is it possible to lift holy offerings to the gods? How is it possible to pour libations anymore?" (πῶς θεοῖς ἔξεσθ', ὁμοῦ / πλεῦσαντος, αἶθιν ἱερά; πῶς σπένδειν ἔτι; 1032–33). Part of what signals Philoctetes' inability to participate in legitimate rituals, then, are the baser animal aspects of his character.⁵⁰

On the other hand, Philoctetes is also separated from human society because of the qualities that make him similar to the gods, some of which even overlap with his presentation as animalistic. In particular, his wound, even as it symbolizes his bestial existence on Lemnos, is equally a connection with immortality. His wound is divinely caused and does not heal as a wound dealt by a mortal would. Through this wound, its enduring failure to heal, and its enduring ability to inflict pain, Philoctetes shares in one aspect of the gods' eternal existence. The wound therefore communicates his distance from the human condition in two ways.

Other aspects of Philoctetes' presentation in this play stress only the divine side of his character. His existence on Lemnos transgresses the normally strong dividing line between life and death, imbuing him with a quality usually reserved for divine or at least semidivine beings.⁵¹ His separation from the Greeks is emphasized by the way his life on Lemnos is described as a logical impossibility, a living death.⁵² It is not just that he wishes to die, though he expresses this wish many times in the course of the play. Rather, the noteworthy detail is that Philoctetes several times describes himself as one already dead. "I have perished," he cries (ἀπόλωλα, 923); he goes on, "He [Neoptolemus] does not know that he has destroyed a corpse, a shadow of smoke, just a shade" (κοῦκ οἶδ' ἐναίρων νεκρόν, ἢ καπνοῦ σκιάν, / εἰδῶλον ἄλλως, 946–47);⁵³ next, "having bound me, you [Odysseus] intend to lead me from this shore where you cast me aside, friendless, abandoned, city-less, a corpse among the living" (συνδήσας νοεῖς / ἄγειν ἀπ' ἀκτῆς τῆσδ', ἐν ἧ με προῦβάλου / ἄφιλον ἐρῆμον ἄπολιν ἐν ζῶσιν νεκρόν, 1016–18); and finally, "I am nothing and have been dead to you for a long time" (ὄς οὐδέν εἰμι καὶ τέθνηχ' ὑμῖν πάλοι, 1030). Isolation on Lemnos imposes on him a living death; indeed, many commentators have described the prospect of his leaving the island as a rebirth.⁵⁴ To regain status in human society, he will have to undergo a godlike reincarnation, an extraordinary prospect that sets him apart from the society of men.

The prophecy about Philoctetes offers a subtler suggestion that he is alienated from human society by his godlike attributes.⁵⁵ Being the subject of a prophecy is not in itself particularly interesting or relevant to the question of his status, since all of Sophocles' extant plays involve an oracular prediction in some way. What is unique about the prophecy in the *Philoctetes* is that the terms of the oracle are so difficult to pin down. The audience is given so many different versions by so many different characters with so many different motives that by the end of the play the content of the oracle is still unclear.⁵⁶ And because this prophecy implicates Philoctetes, he comes to partake in the same ineffable and inscrutable quality that characterizes oracles in general and the gods who dispense them. The authoritative oracular voice, that of Helenus, is usurped by the false merchant and so becomes

untrustworthy.⁵⁷ When Odysseus and Neoptolemus give additional versions of the prophecy, it is clear that the terms of the oracle are dictated by their individual goals rather than the strict truth. Odysseus' desire to persuade Neoptolemus to join in his scheming prompts him to represent the bow, rather than Philoctetes, as the object of the mission, tempting the youth with visions of personal glory.⁵⁸ Neoptolemus, on the other hand, is overcome with pity when he conveys his version of the prophecy to the Chorus in order to persuade the sailors that they cannot simply steal the bow from the sleeping exile; the man himself is required at Troy.⁵⁹ Ultimately, as Cedric Whitman points out, Odysseus' and Neoptolemus' engagement with the prophecy offers more information about each one's character and motivation than about the prophecy itself.⁶⁰

Perhaps most perplexingly, the prophecy apparently includes the stipulation that the Greeks must bring Philoctetes to Troy by "persuading him by means of speech" (πείσαντες λόγῳ, 612). In this specific instance, the audience's mythical knowledge that Philoctetes did ultimately go to Troy sheds no light on the issue. As Karin Alt quite reasonably asks, how can fate dictate how a hero feels about his fate, even if it can guarantee that this destiny will be fulfilled?⁶¹ Until Heracles' appearance at the end of the play, it remains unclear what form the persuasion of Philoctetes might take and still conform to the requirements of the prophecy. Must he be convinced to yield by true words alone, or are deception or coercion permissible forms of persuasion? Where the prophecy is concerned, the audience encounters in Philoctetes a character whose godlike inscrutability transcends its own quasi-divine knowledge of what ought to happen. The audience knows that he must go to Troy, but it is impossible to see how he could ever be persuaded to do so. His association with the prophecy sets him apart from human community and calls into question his ability to participate in human society in a way that holds any long-term legitimacy.

In sum, Philoctetes' metaphorical affinity for both the bestial and the divine supports the other more literal aspects of his exile that indicate his exclusion from Greek society. Given the play's many Homeric echoes,⁶² it is appropriate to hold up Polyphemus the Cyclops of *Odyssey* 9 as a model for Philoctetes' ritual status, since the Cyclops, too, is endowed with strong bestial and divine qualities that affect his ability to participate in ritual. Aligning with Philoctetes' savage way of life and affinity for the beasts of Lemnos, Polyphemus tears men limb from limb like a lion, hiding alone in his cave with a ram as his dearest companion. At the same time, just as Philoctetes has divine qualities through his wound, his living death on Lemnos, and the inscrutable prophecy about his participation at Troy, Polyphemus has divine qualities as the son of Poseidon and draws attention to this aspect of his

identity by worshipping his own stomach as a deity. These nonhuman qualities make Polyphemus' normal participation in ritual impossible, and the same is true of Philoctetes. The Cyclops distorts the rituals of reciprocity in which he participates, engaging in *xenia* by eating his guests rather than feeding them and by offering Odysseus the guest gift of being eaten last. Like Polyphemus, Philoctetes, who is similarly defined by his beastlike and divine characteristics, can ostensibly participate in ritual, but his problematic status and exclusion from human society cause these rituals to go awry, as we shall see.

The Status of Odysseus

At first it seems that there is little to say about the status of Odysseus. It is uncompromised. He is an adult, with all the attendant rights and responsibilities, and he is an integral part of the society of Greek warriors fighting at Troy. But this is precisely the point. The fact that nothing in the play suggests that Odysseus' status in society is at all compromised emphasizes what is problematic about the respective statuses of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes. The exclusion of Odysseus from the events of the play, both when he is onstage and, more often, when he is not, demonstrates that the bond that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes establish between them is extrasocietal. Odysseus will not approach Philoctetes' cave, itself a symbol of isolation, but rather sends Neoptolemus to investigate in his stead (22–25).⁶³ He is also unwilling to make physical contact with Philoctetes to prevent his suicide, instead ordering two of his men to stop the hero from jumping from a cliff in despair (1003).⁶⁴ Most obviously for the audience, Odysseus is present for a scant 282 lines of the play, while Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are onstage for 1330 and 1253 lines, respectively.

Odysseus' place is on the margins of the play, cool, detached, and staunch in his fidelity to the agenda of the Greek army.⁶⁵ His marginalization on Lemnos is a mirror image of the marginalization of the play's two central characters in Greek society. Because his place among the Greeks is so secure, his distance from Philoctetes and Neoptolemus emphasizes their exclusion. Though his presence often serves as a catalyst for the actions of either Philoctetes or Neoptolemus, his most important function in the play is to reinforce the audience's sense of their separation from the rest of the Greeks: while Odysseus is entitled to full participation in Greek society and represents the interests of that society on Lemnos, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are excluded from many different forms of participation—social, political, and, indeed, ritual—because of their lack of legitimate adult status.

**Philoctetes' Requests:
Conflicting Ritual and Dramatic Expectations**

Keeping in mind the abundant clues the *Philoctetes* offers about the status of its central characters—a youth, an exile, and a full, adult member of Greek society—we can now turn to the rituals that involve Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, particularly supplication and oath rituals, and consider how their lack of proper ritual status influences the audience's reception of these scenes.

In order to understand the poetic effect of ritual status problems in the *Philoctetes*, it is necessary to examine closely the rituals that establish obligation between the two central characters, and specifically the rituals surrounding two requests made by Philoctetes. The first is that Neoptolemus not leave him on the island of Lemnos; the second is that Neoptolemus return his bow. In both cases the request and its answer are formalized with a supplication ritual and an oath. These rituals generate conflicting expectations: the ritual expectation of failure and the dramatic expectation of success. The supplications and oaths that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes undertake lack legitimacy by the standards of Greek society and should not be expected to have any ritual effect that the Greeks will recognize. Nonetheless, they contribute to the audience's growing sense of the obligation and trust between the two as the play's plot unfolds. The isolation of Lemnos shields these characters to some extent from the pressure to conform to normal ritual rules—for example, that Neoptolemus be confirmed as an adult member of society before swearing his first oath—strengthening the audience's dramatic expectation that these rituals will succeed. Moreover, these rituals facilitate Neoptolemus' goal of persuading Philoctetes to come to Troy, bolstering their apparent legitimacy because of their conformity with what the audience already knows about Philoctetes' myth.

As it becomes increasingly clear that Philoctetes will prove unpersuadable, the tension between ritual and dramatic expectations grows. Mistakes tied to each character's problematic ritual status gradually creep into both the rituals themselves and the characters' interpretation of them. The characters begin to miss important steps in the rite of passage and, upon the return to structure, misconstrue the changes of status accomplished during their shared *communitas*. This culminates in their decision to sail to Mount Oeta, not Troy. Left to their own ritual ends, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes eventually come to a ritual agreement that not only contradicts mythical orthodoxy but also requires that they leave Lemnos and, therefore, the protective isolation that has reinforced the apparent legitimacy of the rituals performed there. As the characters are poised to quit the island, the audience's ritual and dramatic expectations converge for the first time in the play,

both strongly suggesting that this ostensible ending cannot be the play's true ending.

At this point it is clear that without proper ritual status, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are incapable of negotiating a solution acceptable to the Greeks, the gods, or the audience who shares in the perspectives of both. Indeed, the audience is in a position to see that the thought experiment that Sophocles has allowed to play out on Lemnos has been taken as far as possible. The only way for Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to uphold their obligations to one another and choose a new course that satisfies both ritual and dramatic expectations is somehow to gain legitimate ritual status. Since Neoptolemus, Philoctetes, and even status-possessing Odysseus have proven incapable of negotiating this turn of events, it will be clear to the audience that some external intervention from beyond the isolated shores of Lemnos is required.

Philoctetes' First Request

The first real ritual connection between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes is established through supplication (468–529). Chapter 1 outlines the four steps in a correct act of supplication: the suppliant's approach to an individual or a place, his distinctive gesture followed by a verbal request, and the response of the *supplicandus*.⁶⁶ In this particular supplication, Philoctetes begs Neoptolemus not to leave him alone on the island (ικέτης ἰκνοῦμαι, μὴ λίπῃς μ' οὐτῶ μόνον, 470), and Neoptolemus ultimately agrees verbally to the request when he offers to take Philoctetes with him on his ship (525–29).⁶⁷

In ritual terms this scene offers the audience numerous cues that neither Neoptolemus nor Philoctetes possesses the necessary status to render this act of supplication valid. Philoctetes alludes to Neoptolemus' youth when, addressing him as "child" (τέκνον, 468), he supplicates him in the name of his father and mother, perhaps reminding the audience of the fifth-century youth at his phratry or deme initiation, where ritual participation was likewise dependent on one's parents. This impression of Neoptolemus' youth is confirmed when, instead of simply agreeing to or refusing what Philoctetes asks, he allows the Chorus to give its opinion first and proposes to leave Lemnos with Philoctetes to avoid the shame of seeming less willing than his sailors to help him (524–25). The decision is reached first by adults and only subsequently and in response by the young and inexperienced Neoptolemus. His decision appears to be not truly his own, and this raises doubts about the legitimacy of his ritual commitment.

Similarly, Philoctetes' isolation is emphasized in the speech in which he makes his request, reminding the audience that he is completely cut off from Greek society

(ἔρημον, 471). He tells Neoptolemus how his suppliant pleas have fallen on deaf ears until now:

πολλὰ γὰρ τοῖς ἱγμένοις
 ἔστελλον αὐτὸν ἱκεσίους πέμπων λιτάς,
 αὐτόστολον πλεύσαντά μ' ἐκσῶσαι δόμους.
 ἀλλ' ἢ τέθνηκεν, ἢ τὰ τῶν διακόνων,
 ὥς εἰκός, οἶμαι, τοῦμόν ἐν σμικρῷ μέρος
 ποιούμενοι τὸν οἶκαδ' ἤπειγον στόλον.

(494–99)

[Many messages did I dispatch, sending suppliant prayers with those who came here, asking [my father] to come sailing himself to bring me safely home. But he has died, either that or the words of the messengers have, as is fitting I suppose, since they have made a hurried journey home, taking little account of me.]

A few people have come to Lemnos in Philoctetes' ten years of exile, but he has been unable to make a real ritual connection with even one, since, to a man, they have ignored his "suppliant prayers." The story he tells confirms that he is unable to successfully engage others in supplication, even when, from his perspective, the ritual is performed correctly and in its entirety. He tells a story of securing ritual promises from these ritual interlocutors, but even he admits that they have held those obligations to be of little account. Against the background that Philoctetes provides, it seems unlikely that his most recent ritual request will be granted.

In spite of the ritual expectation that the supplication will fail, however, the performance of a complete and correct supplication nonetheless generates the dramatic expectation of its success. Since the supplication takes place in the isolation of Lemnos, in a ritually permissive environment, the audience is encouraged to be more receptive even to a ritual that would be illegitimate in other circumstances. Moreover, according to the myth, Neoptolemus must bring Philoctetes to Troy, and his promise not to leave Philoctetes on Lemnos aligns with what the audience knows to be mythically necessary. The audience, therefore, despite the problems of ritual status, is simultaneously led to expect the supplication to be effective.

These dramatic expectations surely color the audience's interpretation of Neoptolemus' rather ambiguous behavior several hundred lines later. In the face of Philoctetes' refusal to join the Greek expedition and Odysseus' pressure to simply

abandon him again, since Neoptolemus is now in possession of the powerful bow, the youth, after one hundred lines of silence, addresses the Chorus with the following declaration:

ἀκούσομαι μὲν ὡς ἔφυν οἴκτου πλέως
 πρὸς τοῦδ'· ὁμῶς δὲ μείναιτ', εἰ τοῦτω δοκεῖ,
 χρόνον τοσοῦτον, εἰς ὅσον τά τ' ἐκ νεῶς
 στείλωσι ναῦται καὶ θεοῖς εὐξώμεθα.
 χούτος τάχ' ἂν φρονήσιν ἐν τούτῳ λάβοι
 λῶω τιν' ἡμῖν. νῶ μὲν οὖν ὀρμώμεθον,
 ὑμεῖς δ', ὅταν καλῶμεν, ὀρμᾶσθαι ταχεῖς.

(1074–80)

[I will hear from [Odysseus] that I am, by nature, full of pity. Nevertheless, stay here, if it seems good to [Philoctetes], for as long as it takes the sailors to fit out the ship and us to pray to the gods. And perhaps this man will assume a better attitude toward us in this matter. We are setting off; come quickly when we call you.]

While Neoptolemus' intentions in speaking these lines are ambiguous, the audience's dramatic expectations will inform their interpretation of them. Given the wording of this passage, it is certainly possible that Neoptolemus means to suggest that he will not return to the stage and that the recalcitrant Philoctetes will be marooned on Lemnos indefinitely if he does not capitulate. However, in light of previous events, no audience is likely to interpret the speech in this way. The audience has witnessed Neoptolemus and Philoctetes withdraw into ritual *communitas* and emerge into structure having established a new relationship of obligation between them. Even though Neoptolemus lacks adult ritual status, his apparently genuine commitment to Philoctetes as a *supplicandus* has dramatic if not ritual legitimacy. Moreover, the fact that his ritual commitment not to abandon Philoctetes conforms to the canonical myth reinforces the impression that he will, indeed, come back for Philoctetes later in the play. This expectation proves justified when Neoptolemus returns to the stage at line 1221 prepared to do whatever is necessary to help the exiled hero.

Neoptolemus' commitment not to leave Philoctetes on Lemnos is not only determined by the earlier supplication ritual; it is reinforced by an oath that he offers to Philoctetes shortly after the supplication scene. As we have seen in chapter 1, all oaths have three elements: an assertory or promissory declaration, an explicit

or implicit appeal to the gods as guarantors, and explicit or implicit evocation of a conditional curse.⁶⁸ The first such ritual exchange in the *Philoctetes* occurs when Neoptolemus reinforces his supplicatory commitment to Philoctetes by offering him a promise. At this moment in the play, Philoctetes, who is in the early stages of an attack of his illness, asks Neoptolemus to stay with him and not to leave him alone on the island (809). “Give me the assurance of your hand,” Philoctetes says (ἐμβαλλε χειρὸς πίστιν, 813), and Neoptolemus replies, “I give assurance that I will stay” (ἐμβάλλω μενεῖν, 813). Both the content of the oath, that Neoptolemus will not leave Philoctetes, and its outward sign, the handclasp, are clear.⁶⁹

Again, the validity of this ritual action is undermined by the characters’ respective statuses. Most overtly, Philoctetes actually tells Neoptolemus that it is not right to make him swear (οὐ μὲν σ’ ἔνορκόν γ’ ἀξιῶ θέσθαι, τέκνον, 811), just moments before Neoptolemus nonetheless offers his oath. The fact that Philoctetes addresses him as *teknon* hints at the reason for his hesitation: Neoptolemus is too young to make such a promise. In fifth-century terms he has not yet sworn the transformative ephebic oath and, much like the phratry initiate, cannot undertake oaths on his own behalf. But Philoctetes, in accepting his hand and his promise, chooses to overlook his youth. The older man’s own problematic ritual status is likely implicated in his decision. He receives Neoptolemus’ promise even as he is suffering an attack of the very illness that triggered his abandonment on Lemnos in the first place. His fear of a second abandonment and the isolating suffering inflicted by his wound compel him, in his desperation, to ignore Neoptolemus’ youth. Even as the ritual exchange takes place, the circumstances offer a reminder that neither character is really eligible to participate in it.

In the end, the play shows that Neoptolemus upholds his oath not to leave Philoctetes, even when the strength of this commitment is tested by Odysseus’ pressure to abandon him. Just like the earlier supplication transacted between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, the oath that Neoptolemus has sworn contributes to the dramatic expectation that he does not intend to abandon Philoctetes when he leaves the stage at this point in the play. The ritual expectation that the oath will prove untrustworthy is diminished by the fact that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are acting in the unique environment provided by Lemnos and so may not be bound by normal ritual restrictions in spite of one’s youth and the other’s exile. The fact that the oath commitment to Philoctetes serves the canonical mythical outcome in which the bowman was eventually persuaded to come to Troy gives the audience further reason to trust that Neoptolemus will uphold his obligation. Although ritual criteria suggest that the oath should not be legitimate, the audience’s dramatic expectation that Neoptolemus will keep his promise, having watched him go through the ritual motions, is validated when the youth later returns to the stage.

As the play eventually reveals, Neoptolemus' oath commitment is problematic not because of the young man's inability or failure to uphold it but because of Philoctetes' interpretation of it. Shortly after Neoptolemus promises not to abandon Philoctetes, the older man tries to suggest that Neoptolemus swore to take him home to Mount Oeta (ὁμόσας ἀπάξειν οἴκαδ', 941).⁷⁰ Neoptolemus is so inexperienced in oaths that he does not object to Philoctetes' misrepresentation of the ritual that took place. Lacking the adult status necessary to undertake legitimate oaths, he appears not to understand that the terms of an oath are defined by the ritual words spoken. At this point in the play, this distortion of ritual has no practical consequences, and so the audience's dramatic expectations are only momentarily confounded. However, even the brief suggestion of an outcome that blatantly contradicts not only ritual orthodoxy but also the mythical tradition is jarring. This moment foreshadows the impasse to which the characters' problematic ritual statuses will eventually bring the play.

At this point Philoctetes' first request—that Neoptolemus not leave him behind—has been fully worked out. Odysseus offers Neoptolemus the opportunity to leave Philoctetes on Lemnos under the orders of a superior officer, absolving him of any responsibility to Philoctetes, but the young man does not take it. His ritual commitment to Philoctetes is tested and found to be strong. Of course, since the characters remain on Lemnos, it is still possible that Neoptolemus could choose to break his word and leave the island without Philoctetes. However, his demonstrated integrity in response to the test of his ritual commitments makes this outcome unlikely. Moreover, the play deflects attention from this possibility by exploring Neoptolemus' response to a second request from Philoctetes. This time the rituals in which they engage contain mistakes and bring the characters to the point of breaking with the mythical tradition and leaving the permissive isolation of the island. As the play continues to test the limits of what is ritually possible there, the audience is forced to reevaluate the premise that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are capable of bringing the play to closure through their own ritual efforts.

The Second Request

Philoctetes' second request is that Neoptolemus return Heracles' bow. At this point in the play, the youth has taken possession of the bow after its owner offers him the chance to hold it just before being incapacitated by an attack of his illness. Philoctetes' recovery from this attack and his gratitude that Neoptolemus has not abandoned him like so many former visitors to the island prompts the younger man's guilty confession about his allegiance to the Greek mission and his real intention of bringing the exile to Troy. Philoctetes' horrified response is to beg the youth

to return his only means of self-support. The way he phrases his request highlights what is ritually problematic about it:

οὐδ' ἐπαισχύνῃ μ' ὀρῶν
 τὸν προστρόπιον, τὸν ἰκέτην, ὃ σκέτλιε;
 ἀπεστέρηκας τὸν βίον τὰ τόξ' ἐλών.
 ἀπόδος, ἰκνοῦμαί σ', ἀπόδος, ἰκετεύω, τέκνον.
 πρὸς θεῶν πατρώων, τὸν βίον με μὴ ἀφέλῃ.
 (929–33)

[Do you feel no shame, you wretch, when you look at me, your suppliant and petitioner? In taking my bow you have deprived me of my life. Give it back, I beg you, give it back, I plead, child. In the name of the gods of your father, do not rob me of my life.]

It is relevant to the audience's understanding of this moment that Philoctetes appeals to Neoptolemus in the name of the former suppliant commitment that the youth undertook, asking to be looked upon as his "suppliant and petitioner." The audience is asked to accept the current ritual on the assumption that the previous one was legitimate, which has an equivocal effect on their perception of the scene. On the one hand, the dramatic effect of the first ritual may very well reinforce the dramatic effect of this new one, bolstering the notion that strict ritual rules need not necessarily apply on Lemnos. And yet, at the same time, the scene offers now-familiar indications that Neoptolemus does not have the capacity to undertake the responsibilities of a *supplicandus*, undermining the ritual action. Philoctetes calls him *teknon* again and appeals to him in the name of the gods of his father, once again alluding to a fifth-century ritual context, perhaps phratry or deme initiation, where Neoptolemus, as a youth, would still require his father to act on his behalf before he could participate in the ritual legitimately.

Neoptolemus' response to this request casts further doubt on the ritual's legitimacy. Most importantly, in contrast to the first supplication scene, he does not complete all the necessary steps of the standard rite-of-passage model, giving no answer to Philoctetes' request for the return of the bow and therefore forestalling the final reintegrative step.⁷¹ He expresses intense pity for the exile (965–66), he wonders aloud what he should do (τί δράσω; 969), and then, unable to find an answer, addresses the same question to his elders in the Chorus (τί ὀρωμεν, ἄνδρες; 974). He cannot determine on his own how to answer Philoctetes' ritual plea and instead turns to older, more experienced men for answers. When Odysseus appears onstage, Neoptolemus lapses into silence and allows the adult with status to speak

on his behalf, ultimately leaving the stage, as we have already seen, in obedience to Odysseus' suggestion that he return to the ship. In his uncertainty, he allows Odysseus to interrupt the ritual before he completes it.

Philoctetes' problematic isolation is emphasized in the bitter exchange with Odysseus that ensues once Neoptolemus has left, offering the audience an additional explanation for this ritual failure. Philoctetes' separation from the Greeks and, indeed, from human society is made prominent by reference to his original abandonment (978–79) and by his anguished cry to the land of Lemnos itself (ὦ Λημνία χθών, 986), as he turns to the wilderness and away from human community in his pain. His ability even to participate in a supplication ritual is thus called into question. Unlike the first supplication, after which the audience almost certainly expects Neoptolemus to honor his promise not to abandon Philoctetes on Lemnos, this new supplication certainly raises the possibility that he will return the bow to the exile but, because it remains incomplete, offers the audience no guidance as to whether that outcome is likely.

Already it is possible to see that Philoctetes' second ritual request is not so easily interpreted as the first one. Earlier the status problems that affect both characters merely suggested that the ritual commitment would not be considered legitimate beyond Lemnos; now these problems actually interfere with the successful completion of rituals on the island itself. As before, mythical knowledge suggests to the audience that the ritual request should be granted. After all, Philoctetes requires the bow in order to play his fated role at Troy. In this case, however, the ritual leniency offered by Lemnos is less supportive of the central characters' ritual actions, and real-world concerns, represented by Odysseus' orders to Neoptolemus and his argument with Philoctetes, are more intrusive. This scene suggests to the audience that it is unlikely that the ritual commitments undertaken by Neoptolemus and Philoctetes offer lasting solutions to the conflicts raised in the play.

As it happens, Neoptolemus does give back the bow, even though he never committed to do so via supplication ritual.⁷² When he declares his intentions to Philoctetes, the exile is, unsurprisingly, suspicious and doubtful (1286–88). This prompts Neoptolemus to reinforce his declaration, just as he did in the case of Philoctetes' first request, with an oath sworn by his reverence for highest Zeus (ἀπώμοσ' ἄγγον Ζηνὸς ὑψίστου σέβας, 1289). The oath is quickly discharged as the bow changes hands. Fast on the heels of this oath comes another, Neoptolemus' appeal to Philoctetes in the name of Zeus Horkios (Ζῆνα δ' ὄρκιον καλῶ, 1324) to believe what he has to say about the necessity of the bowman's coming to Troy, both to be healed and to bring about the fall of the city. Neoptolemus quickly fulfills this promise, too, though Philoctetes remains skeptical about the information the youth conveys. Both oaths activate the audience's knowledge of the

mythical tradition, affirming what it knows ought to happen and thereby lending credence to Neoptolemus' ritual commitments. Mythical criteria suggest that in spite of the ritual problems that the play has highlighted, these oath rituals are contributing to a necessary mythical outcome and represent a lasting commitment between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.

Much like Neoptolemus' failure to complete the earlier supplication ritual, however, Philoctetes' response to Neoptolemus' oath undermines these dramatic expectations of ritual success. As he did before, Philoctetes twists the meaning of Neoptolemus' ritual promise and tries to claim that Neoptolemus swore to take him home to Mount Oeta (ἀλλ' ἄ μοι ξυνώμοσας, / πέμψον πρὸς οἴκους, 1367–68; ἃ δ' ἦνεσάς μοι δεξιᾶς ἐμῆς θιγόν, / πέμπειν πρὸς οἴκους, 1398–99). This time, however, Neoptolemus does not merely fail to object to Philoctetes' misinterpretation of the oath; he actually agrees to sail with him for Mount Oeta immediately, in spite of worries about repercussions from the Greeks (1402). Philoctetes plays on Neoptolemus' youthful weaknesses to achieve this outcome, addressing him as *teknon* both times he makes his false claim (1367, 1399). Neoptolemus accedes to Philoctetes' demands, apparently not realizing that he has no obligation to go along with a course of action that he did not actually swear to.⁷³

Even at this juncture, the cumulative dramatic effect of the play still supports the idea that Neoptolemus, regardless of the content of his oath, is obligated to Philoctetes in some way.⁷⁴ In this sense, the play could end with the characters' departure for Mount Oeta and the fulfillment of this obligation. Cues—embedded in meter, structure, and content—reinforce the sense of an ending here.⁷⁵ However, for the first time in the play, the audience's ritual and dramatic expectations converge in insisting that this cannot be the true ending. In ritual terms, as throughout the play, the problematic ritual statuses of both characters cast doubt on the solution reached via their ritual actions. The fact that the second supplication ritual remains incomplete and the oath obligation that Neoptolemus upholds is not the one he committed to amplifies this doubt. In dramatic terms, even though the relationship that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes have forged through ritual is not in question, the factors that have, up to this point, caused the audience to look on their ritual actions with leniency do not apply to the proposal to sail for Mount Oeta. Indeed, their ritual actions have now brought these characters to a cliff's edge. If they go forward, as the play suggests they might, they will leave the protective isolation of Lemnos and the support it provides for their unorthodox ritual commitments; they will also break from the mythical tradition. Both ritual and dramatic criteria suggest that in spite of other cues that imply closure, the solution that the characters come to through Philoctetes' interpretation of Neoptolemus' oath cannot be the true ending.

The Bow of Heracles

One element of the ritual exchange between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes that I have not yet accounted for is the symbolism of Heracles' bow.⁷⁶ This stage property is implicated in both of Philoctetes' requests and is important in communicating with the audience about the ritual status of these characters. After the first supplication, Philoctetes entrusts his bow to Neoptolemus when he is overcome by his illness (763), cementing the relationship of trust that the supplication has already established and anticipating the way in which Neoptolemus' first oath will confirm it. Neoptolemus' second oath, that he will return the bow, clearly echoes and corresponds to the earlier exchange (1291–92). A great many commentators on the play see the return of the bow to Philoctetes as a transformative moment, highlighting ritual changes in both characters as individuals and changes in the nature of their relationship. The return has been seen as a gesture establishing a relationship of *xenia*,⁷⁷ as a symbol of the renewal of ritual activity on Lemnos,⁷⁸ as a token of initiation and religious conversion,⁷⁹ and even as standing in place of the ephebic oath.⁸⁰ While the exchange of the bow does offer a tangible symbol of the mutual obligation that ritual has established,⁸¹ its return is not transformative in the sense that many commentators suggest. The return sets Neoptolemus and Philoctetes on a path that conflicts not only with ritual orthodoxy but also with mythical orthodoxy, emphasizing the problems of status that still affect both characters and casting doubt on the agreement they have reached.

For Neoptolemus, relinquishing the bow to Philoctetes is an affirmation of his youthful status and not symbolic of his swearing the ephebic oath, as Judith Fletcher argues.⁸² The fact that his commitment is a personal one to Philoctetes and not a generic one to his fellow Greeks distinguishes this oath clearly from the one that granted youths entry into deme membership, citizenship, and participation in the assembly. In contrast with historical practice, Neoptolemus swears this oath without first affirming his eligibility and in the absence of the community he is joining. Moreover, the content of the oath is quite distinct from the ephebic oath. Even accounting for the adjustments that must be made in order to compare Neoptolemus' oath to its fifth-century analogue, these rituals have little in common. Fletcher likens the return of the bow to Philoctetes to the moment when Telemachus relinquishes the great bow to his father, Odysseus, in *Odyssey* 21.⁸³ I would support this comparison, but I draw conclusions that are opposite to Fletcher's. This comparison suggests a reversion to childhood rather than the assumption of adult status. Just as Telemachus must step aside and allow his father to manage the household that he, in his youth, has been unable to manage, Neoptolemus relinquishes the bow to Philoctetes and with it the right to make decisions on the

exile's behalf. In both cases the transfer of a bow offers symbolic recognition of an authority figure and confirms the subordinate status of the one who surrenders it. In Neoptolemus' case, this is made clear by the fact that after he relinquishes the bow, he proves susceptible to Philoctetes' manipulation, agreeing to take him home in obedience to an oath the youth has not actually sworn, even though he resisted this suggestion earlier in the play when he was still in possession of the bow.

As for Philoctetes, the moment the bow is returned with an oath affirms his identity as an exile excluded from participation in the Greek community. Up to this point in the play, the emphasis has been on the bow's civilizing qualities. It is the implement that allows Philoctetes to survive the harsh conditions of Lemnos and keep at bay the wild animals that would otherwise kill him (287–92, 952–58). However, when Philoctetes receives the bow from Neoptolemus, the scene emphasizes its capacity to keep not animals but other men at bay. One of the first details given about Philoctetes in his eponymous play is that while he is master of the bow, he can defeat any enemy, including any Greek (75–76). By returning the bow, Neoptolemus grants him the means to make his exile from Greek society permanent, obviating any need for him to conform to the ritual standards of the Greek community.⁸⁴ When he imagines his return to his home near Mount Oeta, Philoctetes speaks boldly of using the bow to keep all the other Greeks away, including any who might seek vengeance on Neoptolemus for the aid he has rendered (1405–7).⁸⁵ The return of his bow, therefore, changes nothing about Philoctetes' ritual status. Although the exact circumstances of his exile will now, in theory, change, he will continue to live in complete isolation from the Greek community. That he addresses his bow in the vocative just as he did the desolate landscape of Lemnos (ὦ τόξον φίλον, 1128, vs. ὦ Λημνία χθών, 986), as Robert Ussher has noted, reinforces the idea that the bow is, at the moment of its return to Philoctetes, a symbol of continued isolation rather than reintegration.⁸⁶

Heracles *ex machina*

As the symbolism of Heracles' bow communicates, both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus retain the problematic ritual status each had at the beginning of the play as they prepare to set sail for Mount Oeta. Ritual principles indicate that the agreement they have reached is invalid by Greek standards, and in spite of the dramatic effect of the characters' ritual activities over the course of the play, the proposed journey to Mount Oeta is further undermined by the fact that this course of action directly contradicts the mythical tradition. At this moment in the play, both ritual and dramatic principles communicate to the audience that this apparent ending cannot be the play's true ending and, more importantly, that

Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, with their problematic statuses confirmed, are incapable of achieving resolution even in the lenient ritual environment offered by Lemnos. Some scholars have attempted to downplay the importance of the so-called second ending that ensues after the return of the bow, suggesting that the sixty-odd lines that follow are merely a coda to the true ending negotiated by Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.⁸⁷ However, analysis informed by ritual poetics strongly suggests that the audience will expect some kind of external intervention at this juncture and will not feel the play to be over before this occurs.⁸⁸

Heracles' arrival onstage addresses the need for outside help. In rejecting the solution reached by Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, he affirms that their ritual-based agreements are invalid beyond Lemnos. However, even though he rejects the play's first ending, Heracles does not reject their relationship and the small society of two they have established through their ritual actions over the course of the play. Heracles' intervention, in fact, conforms exactly to both the ritual and the dramatic expectations that the play has generated, validating the solution that he proposes in poetic terms.⁸⁹ While the temporal limits that Sophocles has chosen for this play prevent Heracles from enacting a ritually and dramatically satisfying ending onstage, his intervention does anticipate the affirmation of the audience's ritual and dramatic expectations. Through his instructions to Neoptolemus and Philoctetes and his predictions of their future actions, Heracles articulates a solution that will allow them to respect both their commitment to each other and the ritual rules governing Greek society. His proposal offers the audience a resolution to the play's central problem—persuading Philoctetes to go to Troy—that is convincing because it anticipates a time when the characters' ritual status will no longer conflict with the implications of their ritual actions.

Heracles offers predictions about the future of both characters. He describes Philoctetes' future most clearly; he will go to Troy, be cured of his illness by the son of Asclepius, kill Paris, and take the spoils of this victory home to his father (1423–30). Neoptolemus' future is less clear, but he will go to Troy and fight side by side with Philoctetes (1433–37). This information about the future confirms that the solution anticipated by Heracles' arrival aligns with what the audience knows to be mythically necessary. Heracles' predictions, therefore, can be quite brief. Much more important is what he has to say about the way in which each of the characters will be able to integrate into the Greek army, resolving the problems of ritual status that ultimately undermine Philoctetes and Neoptolemus' Lemnian rituals. Heracles' main role as the *deus ex machina* is to assure the audience that there is a solution to the ritual status problems that have determined the course of the play and, therefore, that the restrictions impeding Neoptolemus and Philoctetes from integrating into Greek society can be overcome.

Heracles' instructions to both men, indicated by his use of the second person plural, are generic. Philoctetes and Neoptolemus must take thought, after they have conquered Troy, to show reverence to the gods (τοῦτο δ' ἐννοεῖθ', ὅταν / πορθῇτε γαῖαν, εὖσεβεῖν τὰ πρὸς θεούς, 1440–41). "For father Zeus considers all other things secondary," he continues, "and piety does not die with mortals but, whether they live or die, it is not destroyed" (ὡς τᾶλλα πάντα δεύτερ' ἡγεῖται πατὴρ / Ζεὺς. οὐ γὰρ ἡσύεβεια συνθνήσκει βροτοῖς / κᾶν ζῶσι κᾶν θάνωσιν, οὐκ ἀπόλλυται, 1442–44). The generalizing and gnomic quality of Heracles' advice seems especially appropriate for the young Neoptolemus. As the play has shown, he is a youth without a father and without a reliable tutor or role model to guide his development and facilitate his transition into adult life. Heracles appears at the end of the play as the dependable authority figure and ritual guide that Neoptolemus has lacked throughout.⁹⁰ He outlines the religious obligations of the Greek adult, something that Philoctetes and Odysseus have both failed to model or even explain. Heracles' authoritative presence communicates that Neoptolemus does not yet possess the adult ritual status necessary to decide his own future. However, in clearing the obstacles preventing him from attaining this new social standing, Heracles performs a crucial act of sponsorship analogous to the role more typically played by a young man's father in a fifth-century context.

The anticipation of Philoctetes' reintegration into the Greek army is more complicated than Neoptolemus'. While Neoptolemus has not yet joined adult heroic society at the beginning of the play and his association with Philoctetes during the play temporarily threatens to prevent this, his arrival at Troy is in itself sufficient to facilitate his continued progress toward the adult status to which he is inherently entitled. By contrast, Philoctetes' mere physical presence at Troy, while an important first step, is not sufficient to grant him status. His ten years of exile and the bitter grudge he has nursed in that time distinguish him from Neoptolemus because they have rendered Philoctetes incapable of normal relations with the gods or with other people. Aside from the relationship he establishes with Neoptolemus, a relationship that the play has shown to be extremely problematic, Philoctetes is completely isolated from human society. Before any possibility of reintegration into the Greek army can be foreseen, he must relearn the principles of reciprocity that will allow him to interact in society once more.

Addressing this problem, Heracles instructs Philoctetes to dedicate the spoils of his Trojan victories at the site of Heracles' pyre as a memorial for Heracles' bow (ἂ δ' ἄν λάβῃς σὺ σκόλα τοῦδε τοῦ στρατοῦ, / τόξων ἐμῶν μνημεῖα πρὸς πυρὰν ἐμὴν / κόμυζε, 1431–33). These instructions make it clear that Heracles' advice is given to Philoctetes "on credit," in accordance with the normal rules of reciprocity that govern any relationship between a man and either his *philoî* or the gods, both of

whom Heracles represents to Philoctetes. In the capacity of both god and friend, Heracles offers advice with the expectation of a return. If Philoctetes accepts the favor that Heracles is doing him in instructing him about his future deeds, he must accept the reciprocal obligation that this incurs and repay Heracles' gift with gifts of his own.⁹¹ Heracles reminds Philoctetes of the exchange that earned him the bow in the first place, using his past relationship with the exile to instruct him in the rules of social engagement that Philoctetes has neglected on Lemnos. In this play, the bow has symbolized isolation as Philoctetes' means of surviving alone and keeping others at bay; in the future, the bow, along with the spoils that Philoctetes dedicates in its honor, will once more be symbolic of a friendship based in reciprocity. Heracles' instructions emphasize that in contrast with his time on Lemnos, Philoctetes' return to the Greek army will require his acceptance of the rules that govern proper, reciprocal ritual relationships with the divine and with other mortals.

The play ends with the first step toward Philoctetes' reintegration with gods and men: a ritual leave-taking of Lemnos.⁹² As we have seen, Lemnos is both a tangible and a figurative symbol for his isolation. While he remains on the island, even while he remains merely emotionally attached to the island, he cannot rejoin the adult Greek world. Neoptolemus, too, even though he has no strong emotional connection to Lemnos, cannot gain ritual status there. His ephebic oath, or its heroic age equivalent, can be valid only if witnessed by the legitimate members of the society he is joining.⁹³ In his ritual farewell, Philoctetes confirms his intention of doing what Fate, his friends, and the gods all wish him to do (καί μ' εὐπλοία πέμψον ἀμέμπτως, / ἐνθ' ἡ μεγάλη Μοῖρα κομίζει, / γνώμη τε φίλων χῶ πανδαμάτωρ / δαίμων, ὃς ταῦτ' ἐπέκρανεν, 1465–68), an intention that speaks of a willingness to resume membership in any community for the first time in the play. The play's closing words confirm that Heracles' intervention has lifted the barriers preventing Philoctetes and Neoptolemus from rejoining the Greeks.

Conceptually, the appearance of Heracles allows Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to escape the isolation that Lemnos imposes in social, geographic, and religious terms. Heracles represents a divine intervention in the play, bringing Neoptolemus and especially Philoctetes back into contact with the gods. He also restores to Neoptolemus and Philoctetes the possibility of leaving the isolation of Lemnos both physically, by boarding a ship, and socially, by assuming places within the social structures of the Greek army. His words illustrate how they can reintegrate with the army at Troy by ritual means and, at the same time, still uphold the obligations that they have incurred to each other on Lemnos. In this, the dramatic effect of the play's rituals is validated even as the solution to their failed ritual effect—namely, social reintegration—is anticipated. Heracles' appearance affirms the audience's

experience of the play, endorsing both sets of conflicting expectations generated by the play's rituals. Without disappointing either, he shows how the bizarre agreement reached by Neoptolemus and Philoctetes on Lemnos will be plausibly superseded by the familiar details of the myth.

Of course, "dramatic closure" is a far cry from "happily ever after." As many have noted, the ending of the play foreshadows, for example, not only Neoptolemus' arrival at Troy but also his future impieties, particularly the slaughter of Priam at the altar and his eventual murder at Delphi.⁹⁴ The play achieves closure insofar as it provides a satisfying and realistic solution to the problems with which the drama has been chiefly occupied: the related questions of how Philoctetes can be persuaded to fight at Troy and what role Neoptolemus will play in bringing this about. However, a resolution that provides closure by the standards of ritual poetics is not the same as an ending without moral ambiguity. At the end of the *Philoctetes*, the satisfaction of the audience's ritual and dramatic expectations assures them that the play's central dilemma will be resolved beyond the limits of the drama. Ritual poetics offers a concrete way of discussing this aspect of the play's closure, but without diminishing the importance of the moral issues that the play fails to address.

Chapters 2 through 4, each devoted to a single play, have explored in detail all three principal ritual errors in the Sophoclean corpus—problems of conflation, repetition, and status. I now turn to Sophocles' final play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, illustrating how all three kinds of ritual mistakes work in tandem to direct the audience's experience of this ritually rich play.

5

Supplication in the *Oedipus at Colonus*

ὥς νῦν πᾶν τελοῦντι προξένει.

[Show me hospitality as one who will now bring everything to an end.]

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In the preceding chapters I consider problems of ritual conflation, ritual repetition, and ritual status individually, demonstrating the full range of poetic effects that Sophocles achieves through each kind of mistake. In this chapter I take a more holistic approach, examining the occurrence of all three kinds of ritual errors over the course of a single play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*. While any of Sophocles' plays could be examined in this holistic way, ritual is especially prominent in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, which therefore lends itself particularly well to an analysis guided by ritual poetics. All three kinds of ritual mistake play a central role in effecting Oedipus' eventual acceptance among the Eumenides and in shaping the audience's perception of Oedipus and his relationship with the various communities he is tied to in the play, particularly Thebes and Athens. These ritual elements are all united by the overarching motif of supplication.

Most of the plot of the *Oedipus at Colonus* is informed by the interconnected problems of ritual repetition and ritual status as they pertain to Oedipus' supplication of the Eumenides. His ultimate goal in this play is to secure acceptance among these chthonic spirits, a goal inspired by the prophecy that he reveals to the audience early in the prologue. Problems of repetition are introduced during the play's initial act of supplication, his request for the Eumenides' acceptance, which at first goes unanswered because the Eumenides are not yet present to hear his plea. The ritual

lacks the postliminal phase that would either integrate Oedipus into the community of the Eumenides or definitively exclude him. Without this final step, the ritual cue to stop engaging in supplication is absent. This gives rise to a series of further acts of supplication implicating Oedipus that seek indirectly to address the original ritual problem by eliciting, in the end, the Eumenides' answer. By contrast with the *Electra*, the repetition of ritual in the *Oedipus at Colonus* is not primarily a consequence of mistakes or corruptions in the ritual process of these subsequent supplications, although these do occasionally occur. Rather, each ritual looks back to the initial incomplete supplication, both reminding the audience that Oedipus is still waiting for an answer and facilitating the completion of that first ritual.

The repetition of supplication rituals is closely tied to the question of Oedipus' status. During the initial supplication of the Eumenides, the audience will experience the cognitive dissonance I have elsewhere associated with problems of ritual status. On the basis of the prophecy that Oedipus reports, in a genre in which prophecies always prove true, the audience will have the dramatic expectation that his plea will succeed; on the basis of the ritual expectations prompted by the absence of the Eumenides, the audience will expect the supplication to fail. The fact that the supplication is unfinished allows both sets of expectations to persist as the play moves on to further rituals. As the drama continues, it becomes gradually clearer that the absence of the Eumenides is tied to Oedipus' status as defined by his membership in the two communities at the heart of the play's story: Thebes and Athens. Since the Eumenides are associated with neither *polis* but rather occupy a medial position on the border between these communities, Oedipus, too, must come to occupy a similarly medial position in order to gain acceptance among these liminal goddesses. The play's subsequent repeated supplications negotiate and ultimately change his relationship with Thebes and Athens, moving him away from Thebes, though without fully severing his connection with his natal city, and facilitating a rapprochement with the Athenians.

The clarification of Oedipus' relationship with both Thebes and Athens through repeated ritual supplication lays the groundwork for his final ritual transformation at the end of the play, when the Eumenides at last offer their positive response to his initial request. Throughout most of the play, the continual repetition of supplication communicates that Oedipus' ritual and civic status has not yet changed sufficiently for the Eumenides to respond to his entreaty. The audience's ritual and mythical expectations based on the initial supplication remain in tension as further acts of supplication gradually alter Oedipus' status in the communities of Thebes and Athens, rendering him more acceptable to the Eumenides in their medial position between the two. The play arrives at its projected conclusion, the Eumenides' affirmative answer to the initial suppliant request, when Oedipus'

status has been changed sufficiently and these repeated supplication rituals are no longer necessary. The Eumenides' response signals that Oedipus' repetitive engagement in supplication ritual can come to an end. It also resolves the tension between the conflicting ritual and mythical expectations generated in the prologue by finally completing the postliminal phase of the initial supplication in accordance with the prophecy.

By contrast with the play's consistent focus on issues of ritual repetition and status, ritual conflation is largely confined to the play's final two scenes, in which Oedipus dies and becomes, if not precisely a Eumenes himself, certainly a protective spirit aligned with the community of the Eumenides. His death finally closes the narrative arc instigated by his request to these goddesses at the beginning of the play. Throughout, the *Oedipus at Colonus* stresses the ambiguous quality of the Eumenides, who dwell on the boundary between Athens and Thebes and are equally concerned with blessing and cursing. The ritual actions that accompany Oedipus' death confirm the transformation he has undergone over the course of the play through his engagement in repeated acts of supplication. Although these supplications have primarily emphasized his evolving relationship with Thebes and Athens, the conflation of multiple kinds of ritual in the scene of his death reflects aspects of his own ambiguous character and that of the goddesses he seeks to join, each ritual element emphasizing conflicting, even paradoxical, facets of his identity. This final conflated ritual affirms Oedipus' suitability to join the community of the Eumenides and anticipates the role he will play as a chthonic spirit among them, helping Athens and harming Thebes after his death.

***Oedipus at Colonus* as Suppliant Drama**

In his 1951 monograph on the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Ivan Linforth asserts the controversial position that religion does not play a central role in this drama. Even more controversially, he argues that no ritual is actually performed in it beyond the conventional and inconsequential prayers of the characters and the description, though not the actual performance, of the Chorus's purification ritual.¹ Linforth's argument is important insofar as it offered a much-needed correction to anachronistic Christian interpretations of the play, which cast Oedipus in the role of a Jesus-like figure, rewarded by a benevolent God after a life of suffering.² His contention that no rituals beyond prayer are performed onstage, however, is untenable. As I will show, the play's plot is organized around repeated acts of ritual supplication.³ Indeed, with the notable exception of Joseph Wilson, who argues that the *Oedipus at Colonus* is instead a *xenia* play,⁴ most scholars identify it as a suppliant play with overt ritual content.⁵ As Peter Burian in particular has demonstrated,

the *Oedipus at Colonus* contains all the typical elements of a suppliant play, though they are often deployed in atypical ways.⁶ And as Zeitlin notes, “All the vital issues of the play mesh with the demands and counterdemands of the suppliant situation, and the suppliant theme . . . is a yardstick against which Oedipus’ growth can be measured.”⁷

The *Oedipus at Colonus* stages five acts of supplication that directly implicate Oedipus or his status in the grove of the Eumenides, and it is on these ritual scenes that I will focus. The play opens with his request to the Eumenides, which is quickly followed by two further requests. Antigone and Oedipus separately supplicate the Chorus of Colonian Elders. Next comes Oedipus’ supplication of Theseus, perhaps the most prominent iteration of the motif. Finally, Polyneices sits in supplication before his father.⁸ Some of these acts of supplication contain ritual mistakes that necessitate further acts of supplication, much as corrupted death ritual necessitates further death ritual in the *Electra*. The rest, however, are complete and, although they contain irregularities, fundamentally correct. These five acts of supplication together facilitate and communicate Oedipus’ gradual rapprochement with Athens, accepted first by the deme of Colonus and then by the *polis* itself, before he gains acceptance among the Eumenides.⁹ The rituals also formalize and emphasize his separation from Thebes, a shift communicated most strongly in the course of Polyneices’ supplication.¹⁰ Many commentators have suggested that in one sense the play is at an end almost as soon as it begins, identifying Oedipus’ recognition that he has reached the place where he is destined to die as the play’s *peripeteia*.¹¹ However, ritual analysis suggests that his reversal is more gradual than this. The expectations raised by his initial realization are not fulfilled until repeated supplication changes him sufficiently, allowing him to take up his permanent and proper place among the Eumenides after an extended ritual transformation.

The play also includes additional acts of supplication that do not implicate Oedipus directly. Offstage, Polyneices sits in supplication at the altar of Poseidon in order to gain the right to address Oedipus. Antigone supplicates Polyneices, begging him not to lead his Argive forces against the Thebans. Finally, Antigone and Ismene supplicate Theseus after their father’s death, asking him to reveal the location of Oedipus’ grave. While these rituals do not directly affect Oedipus’ relationship with Thebes or Athens, they still contribute to the overall ritual poetic effect of supplication in this play. All the supplications that do not involve Oedipus do involve other Theban characters. Their ritual interactions emphasize that these characters are still emphatically Theban; their position in Athens and the future they face is determined by their Theban identity. These parallel acts of supplication, therefore, provide an important contrast to Oedipus’ situation. Through

supplication he is distanced from his Theban origins over the course of the play, and he gains a place in the Athenian community, which ties his future to the future well-being of Athens. Thus, even though the acts of supplication in which Oedipus is not directly involved play a less central role in my argument, they nonetheless serve to reinforce the effect of the ritual supplications that directly implicate the exiled king of Thebes.

Oedipus and the Eumenides

The Eumenides are central in the transformation that Oedipus undergoes over the course of the play. These goddesses represent the *telos* toward which he progresses. As such, their identity is crucial for a complete understanding of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, and yet even this basic information is not always agreed upon. It has been the concern of many commentators to attempt to determine whether the Eumenides are a completely distinct group of deities or whether they are to be identified with the Semnai Theai or, especially, the Erinyes (or Furies). Part of the difficulty in understanding the relationship between these various goddesses is due to the fact that their names do not often occur in the same contexts; the Semnai Theai and, to a lesser extent, the Eumenides received cult worship, while the Erinyes were primarily literary figures.¹² The issue is further complicated by the ancient reluctance to name deities known to bring harm, even harm to one's enemies, making it difficult to positively identify these goddesses, particularly the Erinyes, even when a source appears to make reference to them.¹³ Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is the most obvious place to begin looking for evidence of their identity in the context of tragedy. While the *Eumenides* stages the transformation of Erinyes into Eumenides, implying that both names refer to the same group of goddesses, it has been pointed out that the name "Eumenides" does not actually appear in the text of Aeschylus' play, whose title was not settled until long after its initial performance in the fifth century. At best, we can only conjecture that the name appeared in one of the play's many *lacunae*.¹⁴

In spite of these difficulties, it seems a safe assumption that by the end of the fifth century, all three names were commonly taken to refer to the same deities, especially in literary contexts.¹⁵ Indeed, the Sophoclean corpus supports this view. Both the *Ajax* (837) and the *Electra* (112) refer to the σεμναὶ Ἐρινύες, suggesting that Sophocles, at least, was aware of a tendency to conflate the Furies and the Semnai Theai. More importantly, the *Oedipus at Colonus* itself blurs the separate identities of these goddesses. When the Eumenides are first introduced to Oedipus by the stranger in the grove, he is told: "The people here would say that they are the all-seeing Eumenides, but other names are good in other places" (τὰς πάνθ'·

ὀρώσας Εὐμενίδας ὃ γ' ἐνθάδ' ἄν / εἴποι λεώς νιν· ἄλλα δ' ἀλλαχοῦ καλά, 42–43). This assertion is borne out in the play as various characters refer to these goddesses equally as Εὐμενίδες (42, 486) and as σεμναὶ θεαί (89–90, 458). While no character refers to them directly as Erinyes, presumably with apotropaic intent, references to the Ἐρινύες of Oedipus (1299, 1434), meaning his curses against his sons, suggest an oblique connection to the Eumenides of Colonus, since the effectiveness of his curses is strongly associated with his growing closeness to the goddesses of the grove, as he himself claims (1389–92). In sum, most scholars, correctly I think, see the three groups—Eumenides, Semnai Theai, and Erinyes—as essentially interchangeable in the *Oedipus at Colonus*.¹⁶ While I predominantly use the term “Eumenides,” I assume that all three names refer to the same goddesses in this play.

The use of three distinct names for the same group of goddesses reflects their contradictory nature, which incorporates many at first apparently incompatible qualities and attributes. More positively, they are habitually associated with fertility and agriculture, marriage, children, protection from bloodshed, prophecy, natural beauty, the protection of oaths, justice, and order. More negatively, they are goddesses of vengeance, curses, death, punishment, *ate*, madness, crop failure, barrenness, family violence, and bloodshed.¹⁷ All Greek deities have the potential to be both beneficent and harmful, and this quality is especially strong in chthonic deities.¹⁸ But the Eumenides represent a particularly extreme example of this phenomenon. The opposition manifested in their various functions is so strong that instead of expressing these different functions with different epithets—as, for example, in the case of the different functions of Zeus Horkios and Zeus Xenios—their beneficent and harmful qualities are expressed through the existence of completely different names: benevolent Eumenides and Semnai Theai and harmful Erinyes.¹⁹

The dual nature of the Eumenides is reflected in concrete ways in archaeological remains. A carving from Tiryns, for example, probably one of the first cult sites where the Eumenides and the Erinyes were explicitly connected, shows a group of goddesses who hold a poppy in one hand and a snake in the other, serving as a warning that these goddesses, while associated with fertility, are not without their dangerous side.²⁰ Less overtly, an inscription from Selinous first published by Michael Jameson, David Jordan, and Roy Kotansky includes instructions for a sacrifice to Zeus Eumenes and the Eumenides along with sacrifices to other benevolent Olympian forces in one of the stele's two columns. The other column describes the propitiation of vengeful Elasteroi. Jameson and his colleagues conjecture that the Eumenides' counterparts, the vengeful Erinyes, are implied but not explicitly named among these harmful entities.²¹ This probable reference to Eumenides and

Erinyes in the same inscription suggests two complementary sides of the same divine force.

The Eumenides' ambiguous character is integral to their portrayal in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. On the one hand, they are frightening (ἐμφοβοί, 39; see also 129–34, where the Chorus describes the fearful silence of those who pass the grove) and of terrible aspect (δεινῶπες, 84). Their grove is closely connected with the underworld (1590–94), and Oedipus calls on them to bring about the death of his sons and Polyneices' permanent expulsion from Thebes (1389–92), while Polyneices blames them for the troubles he has suffered and the evil fate he faces in the future (1298–99, 1432–34).²² On the other hand, they are sweet (γλυκεῖαι, 106), not hard-hearted (μὴ . . . ἀγνώμονες, 86), and kindly (Εὐμενίδας, 486). They check Oedipus' curses (864–65) and are called on as helpers and allies (ἄρωγούς ξυμμάχους θ', 1012; see also 457–60, where Oedipus asks the Chorus to offer him protection with the help of the Eumenides). A. L. Brown sums up the contradictions of their presentation succinctly: "Certainly the γλυκεῖαι παῖδες ἀρχαίου Σκότου *are* paradoxical: goddesses of the Underworld yet dwellers in a charming grove, Fury-like yet nymph-like, punishers of crime yet benevolent to their suppliants, they are ideally suited to presiding over a paradoxical death which is also a blessing and an honour."²³

The setting of the play reinforces the audience's understanding of the Eumenides' contradictory nature. The grove is a fearsome, forbidden place, assiduously avoided by the local demesmen (37, 39–40, 125–27) and, at the same time, a place of great beauty (668–93) and a welcoming refuge for the exiled Oedipus (44–46, 87–93). As David Wiles has argued, the physical space of the stage, signifying the grove of the Eumenides, comes to represent the liminal space between a series of binary oppositions, including Thebes and Athens, female and male, nature and city, and chthonic and Olympian.²⁴ The character of the grove reinforces the portrayal of the Eumenides as creatures who embrace contradiction.

The ambiguity of the Eumenides themselves as well as the grove they inhabit offers a paradigm for the transition that Oedipus undergoes over the course of the drama.²⁵ Although he certainly has an affinity for these deities even at the very beginning of the play, the play does not end with his arrival in their grove. Indeed, the transformation he undergoes as the drama progresses is very much shaped by his ever-stronger alignment with the qualities these goddesses embody. The Eumenides, whose constant unseen presence is suggested by the location in which the drama plays out, model the identity that Oedipus gradually adopts over the course of the play and fully assumes only after they at last accept his suppliant request. The grove serves not only as an appropriate home for the Eumenides but also as an appropriate backdrop for his transformation as he becomes gradually more like them.²⁶ As Lauren Taaffe comments, "Sophocles has put Oedipus in

this grove for a reason; there are too many suggestive remarks about Oedipus' increasing chthonicity, his kinship with the Eumenides, and the strangeness of this place, for it to be inconsequential."²⁷ The grove is a reminder of his goal as the play progresses and reinforces the audience's sense of his growing affinity with these liminal and ambiguous goddesses.

Oedipus is aligned with the Eumenides even before the play's events unfold, providing a fitting point of departure for his story. His Theban past suggests a preexisting mythological connection with these goddesses, who are sometimes associated with the Sphinx (Eur. *Phoen.* 1029) and who, according to Homer, pursued Oedipus for causing his mother's suicide (*Od.* 11.271–80). Oedipus was also associated with Erinyes in historical cult practice, particularly the Spartan cult of the Furies of Laius and Oedipus (Hdt. 4.149).²⁸ These connections are strengthened by his own inherently ambiguous identity, similar to that of the goddesses whose acceptance he seeks. As the audience knows well, and as the Chorus brings out through its questioning, Oedipus' identity is fraught with contradiction. He is citizen and foreigner in Thebes; stranger and resident in Athens; father and sibling to his children; son and husband to his mother; king and beggar; hero and outcast; pure and polluted; innocent and guilty; sighted and blind; victim and avenger.²⁹ Building on this foundation, the play emphasizes and strengthens his similarity to the Eumenides as it progresses. Both the Eumenides and Oedipus are described as all-seeing—the Eumenides explicitly (τὰς πάντ' ὁρώσας, 42) and Oedipus in his clear foresight regarding his own destiny and in his ability, though blind, to guide Theseus to the spot where he will die (1520–21). Oedipus himself notes the fortuitous fact that he has come sober of his own volition to the grove of goddesses who accept no wine libations (98–100).³⁰ Both Oedipus and the Eumenides are described as having εὐμένεια (486–87 vs. 631). Both are sacrosanct, ἄθικτος (the Eumenides' grove at 39 and Oedipus himself at 1521).³¹ And both are difficult for the Chorus to look at directly (the Eumenides are δεινῶπες at 84, while the Chorus calls Oedipus δεινὸς μὲν ὄρᾶν, δεινὸς δὲ κλύειν, 141).³²

The ever-increasing association between Oedipus and the Eumenides culminates in his ritual death. At the end of the play the Theban king experiences a kind of union with the Eumenides and is transformed into a Eumenides-like figure protecting the borders of Athens, echoing the transformation of these goddesses at the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.³³ Oedipus' future Eumenidean role is explicitly foreshadowed by his continual insistence that he will soon possess the power both to curse Thebes and to protect Athens (92–94, 287–88, 457–60, 576–77, 621–22, 787–88, 1524–25, 1534–35). His claims are bolstered by additional similarities between himself and the Eumenides after his death. His tomb, just like their grove, is a forbidden space, to be known only by Theseus and select descendants.³⁴

Similarly, just as the Eumenides are described as daughters of Darkness at the beginning of the play (παῖδες . . . Σκότου, 106), Oedipus after his death is hailed as one clothed in darkness (ὃ τὸν αἰὲ κατὰ γᾶς σκότον εἰμένος, 1701).³⁵ For all these reasons, the Eumenides whom Oedipus first supplicates must be understood as absolutely central in any understanding of his evolution as a character over the course of the drama. They are the endpoint toward which he strives and, moreover, they model the contradictory qualities he must embrace in order to attain that goal and fulfill the prophecy he reveals when he first enters their grove.

Ritual Repetition and Ritual Status

The play's first act of supplication occurs almost immediately, instigating a series of repeating rituals that give shape to the developing plot. When a stranger informs the recently arrived Oedipus that he has trespassed in the grove of the Eumenides, Oedipus immediately recognizes the terms of a prophecy he once received and asks, "May they receive this suppliant graciously" (ἀλλ' ἵλεω μὲν τὸν ἰκέτην δεξαίατο, 44). Moments later, after the stranger's departure, Oedipus directs a more formal version of the same request to the Eumenides, saying:

ἀλλά μοι, θεαί,
βίου κατ' ὁμῶς τὰς Ἀπόλλωνος δότε
πέρασιν ἤδη καὶ καταστροφὴν τινα,
εἰ μὴ δοκῶ τι μειόνως ἔχειν, αἰεὶ
μόχθοις λατρεύων τοῖς ὑπερτάτοις βροτῶν.
ἴτ', ὃ γλυκεῖται παῖδες ἀρχαίου Σκότου

(101–6)

[But grant to me, according to the voice of Apollo, a passage through my life and its conclusion, if I do not seem to be at all lowly, always enslaved to the most extreme troubles of mortals. Come sweet children of ancient Darkness!]

In terms of Naiden's four-step model (see "Supplication" in chapter 1), this supplication is problematic, largely because the *supplicandae* are not present and there is no altar or statue to which Oedipus can direct his prayers or, at this moment, a human authority figure who can accept him in the goddesses' stead. As a result, the fourth step of the typical supplication, in which the petitioner receives an answer, cannot immediately take place. For Wilson, this is sufficient to conclude that no supplication occurs. He argues that Oedipus already knows his fate from

Apollo's oracle and so his ritual actions are pro forma and not genuine.³⁶ Wilson's argument takes too little account of the fact that ritual is, by its very nature, pro forma. Rituals, correctly performed, should have predictable outcomes, and the fact that Oedipus may already feel confident that Apollo's predictions will come true has no bearing on the question of whether to voice his suppliant request. Knowing what the answer will eventually be does not make the formal question unnecessary.

Although Oedipus' language and attitude make it clear that a supplication does indeed take place, however, the absence of the Eumenides as he asks for their acceptance delays the completion of the ritual until the end of the play. His supplication is stalled in the liminal phase as he awaits their answer. He remains in a kind of ritual limbo, neither rejected by the goddesses nor welcomed into their grove. His ambiguous status creates conflicting expectations for the theater audience, generating a tension between the ritual expectation that the supplication must fail in the absence of *supplicandae* and the dramatic expectation that the goddesses must arrive to embrace Oedipus as prophecy demands. The ritual framework provided by this opening act of supplication anticipates an eventual answer to the request. As Oedipus undergoes a series of minor adjustments to his status, particularly in his relationships to Thebes and Athens, the audience will have to evaluate these changes in relation to the open-ended supplication of the Eumenides. Each new adjustment to his status has implications for their eventual answer and, indeed, their willingness to offer an answer at all. Until such time as the Eumenides are prepared to offer their response, Oedipus is not integrated into any community. His ongoing engagement in supplication ritual, activity that subtly modifies his relationships with Thebes and Athens, serves his ultimate goal of forging a new relationship with the community of the Eumenides.

The notion that the play continually anticipates the Eumenides' answer to Oedipus' entreaty is reinforced by his physical position throughout his transformation. Once he enters the grove and settles at its edge, a physical representation of his liminal status, Oedipus is immovable, staying close to the Eumenides in expectation of eventually receiving their ritual response. Each new act of supplication that occurs in the play is, therefore, centered on both Oedipus and the Eumenides in a physical sense.³⁷ All the other characters who participate in the play's rituals, whether as suppliants or as *supplicandi*, must enter a space dominated by Oedipus. He is the only constant in the succession of rituals performed before the audience, and this reinforces the impression that the rituals' importance lies in their effect on him rather than on any of the other participants. His central and static position also supports the impression of a single overarching ritual process for the entire

play, which is ultimately concerned with his relationship to the Eumenides and implicates others only indirectly.

The first person that Oedipus encounters in the grove after his initial request is an anonymous Colonian stranger. His time on the stage is very brief; his approach is spotted by Antigone at line 29, and he is gone by line 80. The stranger serves a pragmatic but nonetheless important function in the play. He informs both Oedipus and the audience that the action will unfold in the grove of the Eumenides (39–43) and emphasizes that he himself has no authority to decide what should happen to Oedipus, insisting rather that the men of the deme of Colonus must be called to deal with this intrusion into the goddesses' holy space (47–48, 77–80). This deferral of responsibility has significant implications for the rest of the play as well. By informing both Oedipus and the audience that the Theban exile has trespassed in the grove of the Eumenides, a place sacred to the demesmen of Colonus and ruled over by King Theseus of Athens (64–69), the stranger foreshadows clearly how Oedipus must go about becoming acceptable to the goddesses who dwell here. His information prompts Oedipus' supplication of the Eumenides, but, equally importantly, he helps to define both for Oedipus and for the audience what the acceptance of this supplication will entail. By identifying all the parties who have a stake in the fate of anybody who enters this grove, the stranger makes explicit the social categories relevant to Oedipus' anticipated integration among the Eumenides. He defines the intermediate changes of status that Oedipus must undergo, gaining acceptance first from the demesmen and second from Theseus himself, before the Eumenides will respond to the original supplication.

In the *parodos* the play's focus shifts from the nameless stranger to the Colonian demesmen, who have a privileged relationship to the grove. The Chorus is consistently defined by its connection to the Eumenides' sanctuary, presented as guardians of the land with an intense local patriotism and both religious and ritual expertise where the goddesses are concerned. While the Chorus has no special political status that would allow it to accept Oedipus in Athens, its authority in matters concerning the grove is unquestioned. This authority is communicated subtly by the very poetry of its dialogue, since, as Umit Singh Dhuga demonstrates, the Chorus often induces the characters with whom it interacts to adopt the meter it uses.³⁸ Moreover, even though Theseus obviously possesses a political authority that the Chorus does not share, the Colonian Elders play the greatest part in facilitating Oedipus' welcome in the grove. The essential dialogues that situate him in the Eumenides' sacred space, establishing his ambiguous character and defining his intermediate position between Thebes and Athens by questioning him about his past, all take place between Oedipus and the Chorus. The suppliant

exchanges that implicate the Chorus are, therefore, crucial ritual cues in the development of the plot and in Oedipus' progress toward acceptance among the Eumenides.

The next act of supplication, Antigone's request of the Chorus, inverts the typical suppliant pattern even before the request is uttered. When the Chorus asks Oedipus to leave the seat he has taken in the grove of the Eumenides, he asks his daughter what he should do. Antigone tells him, "It is necessary to care for the same things as the citizens, yielding and obeying where we ought to" (ἄστοις ἴσα χρὴ μελετᾶν, / εἴκοντα ἃ δεῖ κακοῦντας, 171–72). The problem with her response in ritual terms is that she has reversed the normal order of supplication. She advises Oedipus to act as though his suppliant request has already been granted, as though she and he have already been accepted by the Chorus and are already part of the same civic group. Oedipus adopts her perspective; when the Chorus asks him to move from his position in the grove, claiming that he should share its concerns, he complies (184–87). In other suppliant tragedies, the suppliant never willingly moves from his place of supplication before making and receiving an answer to his request. This convention is here overturned. It is only after Oedipus moves from the forbidden spot in the grove that Antigone formally supplicates the Chorus (237–53), continuing to invert the ritual by appealing to the Elders prematurely as fellow demesmen, asking them to look on her "as one of your own blood appearing before you" (ὥς τις ἀφ' αἵματος / ὑμετέρου προφανεῖσα, 245–46).

Her supplication fails to earn acceptance because of problems relating to Oedipus' and her own status. Her request relies on the problematic premise that the Chorus should treat the foreign suppliants as though they were already demesmen. As a result, her actions represent a ritual failure. However, the ritual sequence is not without dramatic importance. Antigone's reversal of the typical order of supplication creates the opportunity for the Chorus to question Oedipus about his past before it is confronted with any ritual request. Because of the space that Antigone creates for this dialogue, the Theban exile's past is laid bare in a few short lines (203–26). The scene highlights his lingering connection to Thebes, in spite of his banishment, and so highlights the aspects of his identity that must be addressed before he can gain acceptance among the Eumenides. Antigone's problematic supplication, even though it practically guarantees its own failure as ritual, nonetheless does the important poetic work of establishing Oedipus' initial status in relation to Thebes and Athens. This first act of supplication after the initial appeal to the Eumenides identifies for the audience Oedipus' ongoing entanglements with Thebes, revealing what aspects of his civic and ritual identity still need to be resolved before the plot can move forward to the *telos* predicted at the beginning of the play.

Following Antigone's failed attempt at supplication, Oedipus tries to repair the damage done by the revelation of his identity, claiming that he has come to this point in his life in ignorance and cannot be blamed for the crimes he unknowingly committed (273–74). His formal suppliant request follows this brief defense (ἰκοῦμαι πρὸς θεῶν ὑμᾶς, 275). His subsequent arguments consist largely of conventional rhetoric about acting piously and revering the gods, all to be expected from a suppliant making his case, but one claim is conspicuously out of place. Close to the end of his speech, Oedipus reminds the Chorus that it earlier accepted him as a suppliant under oath (τὸν ἱκέτην ἐχέγγυον, 284) and demands that it act accordingly. He is putting the cart before the horse, much as Antigone did in asking the Chorus to assess her request as though it were coming from a citizen of Colonus. He demands that the Chorus uphold a ritual obligation it has not incurred, even as he initiates the very ritual that his request relies on. Oedipus is saying, essentially, accept me as a suppliant because you have already accepted me as a suppliant. His claim seems to rest on the Chorus's promise: "No one will ever take you from this seat against your will, old man" (οὐ τοι μήποτε σ' ἐκ ἐδράνων, ὃ γέρον, / ἄκοντά τις ἄξει, 176–77), but since Oedipus has not yet made a formal request at this point, the Chorus is not bound by the laws of supplication. Some apologists feel that Oedipus does have a case here and that, at the very least, the Chorus has broken a promise.³⁹ But the nature of his claim, particularly the fact that he specifies a suppliant obligation, undermines this view.⁴⁰ Fundamentally, Oedipus' ritual is distorted because his request is founded on claims to a status that he, in fact, does not have, and as a result the Chorus leaves his request unanswered and the supplication incomplete, remarking, "As far as I am concerned, it is enough for the rulers of this land to decide this matter" (τοὺς δὲ τῆσδε γῆς / ἄνακτας ἄρκει ταῦτά μοι διειδέναι, 294–95).

Although the ritual itself fails and the Chorus does not give Oedipus an answer to his request, his supplication still communicates information of dramatic value to the audience. It is a reminder that his initial request of the Eumenides has not yet been answered and that he has not yet been integrated into any community since arriving on the threshold of the Eumenides' grove. It also clarifies his status in the grove, emphasizing that he must be accepted not only by the Chorus but also by Theseus, whose arrival the Chorus now awaits. The decision to delay a response until the arrival of the Athenian king defines a necessary interim ritual step in Oedipus' progression toward the Eumenides. The Chorus's horrified reaction to Oedipus' past also confirms that his lingering ties to Thebes and the horrendous crimes committed there must be severed or at least mitigated before the play's initial suppliant request can be properly answered. Finally, Oedipus' problematic ritual status in this supplication—asking the Chorus to treat him as though he

had already been accepted as a suppliant—looks forward to the positive outcome that the audience nonetheless anticipates. Much as in the *Philoctetes*, where the Lemnian exile asks Neoptolemus to uphold an oath he has not made and in doing so foreshadows the characters' mutual support of each other at Troy, Oedipus' suppliant appeal to the Chorus in the guise of one who has *already* been accepted as a suppliant foreshadows the fact that his supplication will be accepted by the Chorus and, ultimately, by the Eumenides (see "The Second Request" in chapter 4). The tension between ritual and mythological expectations here echoes the tension produced by Oedipus' first suppliant plea in the prologue.

The next act of supplication must await Theseus' arrival. In the interim, Ismene arrives with news from Thebes. Her words offer a reminder that Oedipus' medial position between Thebes and Athens continues to fluctuate over the course of the play; they also prompt some progress on that front. She explains that the Thebans, in response to an oracle, wish to settle Oedipus not in but only near Thebes for their own benefit (389–411). That he is not wanted on the soil of Thebes is itself symbolic, affirming his continuing separation from the city of his birth. This sense of separation is strongly reinforced by his harsh reaction to news of Polyneices and Eteocles: his utter rejection of Thebes is clear in his dismissal of the sons who now fight over rule of that city.

In the course of Ismene's visit, something changes for the Colonians. In spite of its earlier anxiety, the Chorus now sees Oedipus as deserving of pity (461), so much so that it gives him instructions for an elaborate purification ritual (466–92), the most detailed description of such a ritual that survives in Greek literature. As many have pointed out, this ritual is a dramatic convenience, removing Ismene from the stage to perform the act so that the third speaking actor can return as Theseus following the choral ode.⁴¹ It has also been noted that this detailed ritual prescription must have been aesthetically appealing to the audience, both for its own sake and as part of the extensive description of the natural beauty of Sophocles' natal deme of Colonus.⁴² But while both of these explanations are likely true, far more important for the reading of the play that I wish to advance is the role that this purification ritual plays in strengthening Oedipus' relationship with, on the one hand, the demesmen of Colonus and, on the other, the Eumenides.

The Chorus's offer of the instructions for performing this purification ritual signifies a reversal in its attitude toward Oedipus and, at least symbolically if not literally, its acceptance of his supplication despite its initial deferral.⁴³ The ritual performs an integrative function, demonstrating that the Chorus sees him as having a legitimate place in its community—precisely the outcome that supplication typically facilitates. In particular, the ritual allows the Chorus to overcome its fears of the pollution arising from Oedipus' past actions, creating an opening for a second

conversation about his history (510–48). The performance of the purification gives the Chorus a second chance to come to terms with the horrors of Oedipus' past, ultimately putting to rest its lingering concerns about his polluting presence in the grove.

As well as negotiating a more secure relationship between Oedipus and the Colonian Elders, this ritual is also important in that it clarifies Oedipus' evolving position in relation to the Eumenides. It makes good his ritual violation of the grove, removing any *miasma* that has resulted from his trespass. At the same time, the audience is reminded yet again of Oedipus' original and still incomplete supplication when the Chorus instructs him to pray "that those whom we call Eumenides may receive the suppliant as saviors with kindly hearts" (ὥς σφας καλοῦμεν Εὐμενίδας, ἐξ εὐμενῶν / στέρνων δέχεσθαι τὸν ἱκέτην σωτηρίους, 486–87).⁴⁴ This renewed contact with the Eumenides, even if only through the description of a rite in their honor, also looks forward to the anticipated future relationship between Oedipus and the goddesses. The ritual itself is a kind of prelude in miniature to Oedipus' supernatural departure from the grove.⁴⁵

It is important to recognize that while the purification ritual strengthens Oedipus' connection to the Eumenides, it does not represent their acceptance of his supplication. Nothing fundamental has changed in their relationship, because Oedipus has still not come into contact with the goddesses and no answer has been offered to his initial supplication.⁴⁶ The ritual purification represents only a renewal of his request, reminding the audience of what has already been foreshadowed and revitalizing the sense of expectation created by the original supplication. This ritual does not complete the supplication but rather takes its place in the larger ritual arc that informs the plot of the play as a whole. Oedipus is now an acceptable visitor in the grove, which mitigates the ritual expectation that the original supplication cannot succeed despite the predictions of the Pythia. Though he has moved one step closer to an answer from the Eumenides, further repetition of the supplication ritual is still required to adjust his status before he can become a resident in the grove.

When Theseus arrives, another scene of supplication ensues. Once again, the distortion of the typical supplication ritual offers important clues as to Oedipus' evolving status, this time in relation to his status in Athens. This supplication offers a reversal of the typical attitudes of suppliant and *supplicandus*. According to John Gould, the actions of a suppliant should amount to total self-abasement, preventing the competition for honor that would otherwise characterize an encounter between local king and visiting stranger.⁴⁷ This dynamic is completely missing from Theseus' encounter with Oedipus. To begin with, Theseus, and not Oedipus, speaks first, introducing the language of supplication in the scene (προστροπήν, 558), though

the ritual usually requires that the suppliant introduce the request.⁴⁸ Indeed, Oedipus half-complains that Theseus has left him little to say (569–70). Moreover, rather than making a request himself, he further distorts the usual suppliant procedure by making an offer instead: “I have come in order to give my wretched body as a gift to you” (δώσω ἱκάνω τοῦμὸν ἄθλιον δέμας / σοί, δῶρον, 576–77). Throughout their encounter, it is clear that despite his ostensibly weak and dependent position as suppliant, and despite the fact that he did not initiate the ritual, Oedipus is the one directing its progression. When Theseus suggests that Oedipus’ request is a light one (586), Oedipus corrects the king, pointing out that Theseus would be undertaking no small conflict by welcoming him into Athens (587).⁴⁹ He also bluntly chastises Theseus when the Athenian king suggests that Oedipus moderate his anger toward his sons (592–93). In fact, Theseus, very much at odds with his ostensibly more powerful role in this ritual, responds humbly, asking Oedipus to instruct him in the matter (δίδασκ’, 594).

Given the content of the prophecy revealed at the beginning of the play, the audience will not expect Theseus to reject Oedipus’ presence in Athens, and in the end he does not. Before he accepts the Theban exile, however, the king engages him in a detailed discussion about the benefit Oedipus brings and his ongoing connections to Thebes. As a result, the suppliant ritual provides an opportunity for the audience, as much as Theseus, to observe just how much Oedipus has distanced himself from his native *polis* even since the beginning of the play. He warns Theseus of a future war between Athens and Thebes in which the mere presence of Oedipus’ corpse will turn the tide of battle in favor of the Athenians (616–23). “Only keep your word,” he tells Theseus, “and you will never say that you received Oedipus as a useless inhabitant here” (τὸ σὸν μόνον / πιστὸν φυλάσσων· κοῦποτ’ Οἰδίπουν ἐρεῖς / ἀχρεῖον οἰκητῆρα δέξασθαι τόπων / τῶν ἐνθάδ’, 625–28). It is this speech that finally persuades Theseus to accept Oedipus. He does so on three grounds: first, because he is now convinced that Oedipus is an ally to Athens; second, because Oedipus is a suppliant of the gods—that is, the Eumenides; and third, because he brings a valuable gift (632–35). In addition to Oedipus’ clear separation from Thebes and rapprochement with Athens, Theseus reminds the audience, almost casually, of Oedipus’ long-standing supplication of the Eumenides. It is not the case, as Mina-deo argues, that Theseus delivers the Eumenides’ definitive response to Oedipus’ initial suppliant prayer.⁵⁰ Theseus cannot speak for the goddesses, any more than the Chorus of Colonian Elders can. Rather, the king’s acceptance brings Oedipus that much closer to Athens and separates him that much farther from Thebes. A major obstacle to Oedipus’ acceptance as a suppliant by the Eumenides, his lack of legitimate status in Athens, is overcome.

A great deal of ink has been spilled over the question of precisely what status Oedipus is granted in Athens when Theseus accepts him; suggestions include citizen, metic, guest friend, or some less clearly defined category of foreign resident.⁵¹ Ultimately, the question cannot be firmly settled. In ritual terms, however, the very ambiguity of Oedipus' position in Athens is an important aspect of his status as he moves closer to his permanent place with the Eumenides. Lack of a defined place in Athens aligns him with the goddesses he proposes to join. Their relationship to Athens is not clearly defined, since they exist in the liminal space between Athens and its neighbors. The fact that Theseus proposes to settle the exile in the *χώρα* and not the *πόλις* (637) may reflect Oedipus' growing affinity with these liminal goddesses. Oedipus' response to Theseus' acceptance of his supplication, politely declining the king's offer to go to the palace in Athens (643–44), certainly reflects an awareness of his own ambiguous position in the Athenian community. He deliberately chooses to remain near the grove, in accordance with the prophecy and his affinity with the Eumenides, on the margins of Athens and in the liminal space between Athens proper and the rest of the world. Zeitlin rightly speaks of “the irreducible ambiguity of his status in the community.”⁵²

Although the precise nature of Oedipus' status in Athens remains unclear, his connection to the city has been definitively established. Following his ritual exchange with Theseus, Oedipus' new status in Athens is immediately put to the test in two scenes that force him to confront his Theban past. The first involves the arrival of Creon, who, at first with honeyed words and eventually with open threats, attempts to coerce him to return to Thebes. Oedipus is unmoved by Creon's assertion of Thebes's claim on him and declares that his vengeful spirit (*ἄλᾶστωρ*) will always dwell at Colonus (787–88). Their confrontation, as Burian notes, represents a typical scene in the suppliant drama, in which the suppliant, with the help of new allies, must resist those who wish to remove him from safety.⁵³ The ritual nature of the scene once again provides a poetic opportunity to communicate and refine Oedipus' status. Creon's failure to assert any kind of hold over Oedipus represents an important milestone in his settlement at Colonus with the Eumenides.⁵⁴ The same can be said of the way in which Theseus is called upon to uphold the commitment he made to Oedipus as *supplicandus* when Creon abducts Ismene and Antigone. When he returns the girls to Oedipus, Theseus can rightly claim, “I have not proven false in any way with regard to the oaths I swore” (*ὅν γὰρ ὥμοσ' οὐκ ἐψευσάμην / οὐδέν σε, 1145–46*). Creon's arrival tests and confirms Oedipus' new standing in Athens and his further separation from Thebes.

What remains less clear is the exact nature of Oedipus' relationship with the Eumenides at this point. He appears to have moved closer to these goddesses

through his acceptance by the Colonian Elders and Theseus. He feels confident, for example, in cursing Creon in their name (864–70) and, later, in renewing his supplication of them:

ἐγὼ νῦν τάσδε τὰς θεὰς ἐμοὶ
καλῶν ἱκνοῦμαι καὶ κατασκήπτω λιταῖς
ἐλθεῖν ἄρωγους ξυμμάχους θ', ἵν' ἐκμάθῃς
οἷων ὑπ' ἀνδρῶν ἦδε φρουρεῖται πόλις.
(1010–13)

[I now supplicate these goddesses, calling them to me, and importune them with prayers to come as helpers and allies so that you may learn by what sort of men this city is defended.]

This last part of Oedipus' declaration is important. His supplication of the Eumenides is renewed, but once again the answer from the goddesses themselves is deferred, and once again it is Theseus who answers his suppliant request in the interim. Theseus, as the leader of the Athenians, serves as a substitute for the Eumenides until they are prepared to offer an answer themselves. The audience learns from this scene that Oedipus has moved closer to the Eumenides and that his relationship with Athens has been strengthened, but the question of his acceptance among the Eumenides remains open. The tension between ritual expectations and mythological ones persists. The audience's expectations about the progression of the plot from this point forward are still defined by the ongoing expectation that eventually the Eumenides must give Oedipus an answer and that this answer must be affirmative.

The scene with Polyneices, which follows Creon's departure, offers the same message as the scene with Creon, emphasizing the growing strength of Oedipus' relationship with Athens and his concomitant separation from Thebes. Where it differs is in its much more explicit use of the suppliant motif. It is symbolic that Polyneices has to supplicate at an Athenian altar in order to gain access to his father. Even though Theseus is the one who ought to answer any supplication made at an altar on Attic soil, it falls ultimately to Oedipus to decide whether Polyneices is received. This minor ritual detail indicates that Oedipus' status has been altered sufficiently since the beginning of the play that the decision over whether to grant a ritual privilege to a suppliant at an Attic altar can rest with him and not with a local authority.

Although Polyneices uses the opportunity his father affords him to point out how similar their situations are, as both are beggars and strangers (πτωχοὶ μὲν ἡμεῖς

καὶ ξένοι, 1335), the supplication scene primarily emphasizes the great distance between father and son. Oedipus makes it clear that he has agreed to see Polyneices only to gratify his host, not because of their family ties or even their shared Theban identity (1348–51). This sense of obligation to Athens does not extend to granting Polyneices' suppliant plea. Oedipus' sharp rejection clearly demonstrates his attenuated relationship with Thebes. From his perspective, he and his sons are no longer fellow citizens, as even Theseus notes (σοὶ μὲν ἐμπολιν / οὐκ ὄντα, 1156–57), and Oedipus, though he cannot deny his Theban birth, denies any ongoing obligation to or connection with Thebes.⁵⁵ The contrast between the first supplication in the play and this one is stark. Oedipus now enjoys a position of ritual power in a community where he only recently arrived as a helpless suppliant himself. This ritual encounter with Polyneices also highlights how Oedipus has become more and more like the Eumenides over the course of the play, even invoking these goddesses as he viciously curses his sons (καλῶ δὲ τὰσδε δαίμονας, 1391). He has come to personify Eumenidean revenge.⁵⁶

At this juncture Oedipus, through repeated acts of ritual supplication, has passed a threefold test of his separation from his native *polis*. He has gained acceptance in the grove, in spite of his past crimes and his initial trespassing, from both the Colonians and Theseus; he has withstood the physical and political threat represented by Creon; and he has resisted the emotional and familial pressure by which Polyneices attempts to gain his sympathy.⁵⁷ The exchange between father and son is followed immediately by a new ritual supplication that affirms Oedipus' separation from his former city, even though he does not participate in it: namely, Antigone's ultimately unsuccessful plea to Polyneices not to lead the Argives in an attack against Thebes (1414–38). This ritual certainly contributes to the pathos of the moment, since the audience is well aware of the tragedy awaiting both Polyneices and Antigone upon their return to Thebes. Polyneices' death and Antigone's tragic failure to bury him are openly foreshadowed immediately before she makes her request (1405–13). However, the supplication is perhaps even more important dramatically for what it communicates about Oedipus. Although at the beginning of the play he was defined by his implication in the tragic fate of the Theban royal household, the future that Polyneices and Antigone help the audience to foresee excludes him entirely.

The repetition of the supplication motif has allowed the audience to witness Oedipus moving close enough to Athens and far enough from Thebes for his supplication to be acceptable to the Eumenides, simultaneously revealing qualities that he shares with these ambiguous goddesses. Polyneices' refusal of Antigone's suppliant request brings the sequence of ritual repetition to an end. With all the necessary adjustments to Oedipus' status accomplished, a solution to the tension

between the audience's conflicting ritual and mythological expectations is finally possible, and the supplication ritual need no longer be repeated. The play now moves to answer the question that Oedipus asked in its first lines, engaging the poetic resources of ritual conflation.

Conflation

The *Oedipus at Colonus* ends with a ritual scene whose first half unfolds onstage between lines 1456 and 1555 and whose second half is described by a messenger between lines 1579 and 1655. Before exploring the various ritual motifs at work in this scene and what they convey about Oedipus to the audience, a brief summary of the ritual is necessary. Zeus's thunderbolts instigate the series of ritual events (1456), perplexing the Chorus (1463–71) and Theseus (1500–1504) but offering a transparent message to Oedipus (1460–61, 1472–73). In spite of his blindness, he confidently leads Theseus and his daughters to the correct location for the ritual (1520–21, 1542–46), explaining to Theseus that only the Athenian king and his descendants may know the location of his grave (1523–34). Oedipus himself conveys this much to the audience while he is still on the stage; the remainder of the ritual scene is described in a messenger speech after the ritual is completed. Oedipus leads Theseus and his daughters to the site for his own death and integration into the community of Eumenides near a brazen threshold, the rocky basin symbolizing the covenant of Theseus and Perithoos, and a dead pear tree (1590–97). He strips off his filthy clothes, and his daughters perform libations, wash him with water from a flowing stream, and provide him with customary garments (1597–1604). Further thunder (1606) urges Oedipus to hurry, provoking the girls to wail and beat their chests (1606–22). As Oedipus hears Zeus's voice urging him on (1623–28), he bids farewell to his daughters, making Theseus swear to take care of them (1629–37) and sending them away (1638–47). The messenger ends with a report of Theseus shading his eyes for a moment, then saluting both earth and sky (1648–55), even as, in the interim, Oedipus has disappeared.

Unsurprisingly, this conglomeration of ritual elements has no exact parallel among the surviving descriptions of ritual from the ancient world. However, it incorporates elements of several rituals familiar to us and to Sophocles' original audience from other contexts, including aspects of death rites, mystery cult initiation, and animal sacrifice. Although, as I will discuss, Oedipus' status after the completion of this ritual scene is most similar to that of a cult hero, the exact nature of his role among the Eumenides who now accept him is left imprecise. Rather than assigning him a very specific ritual status, this final ritual scene instead stresses his similarity to the ambiguous Eumenides, particularly with regard to his analogous

relationships with Athens and Thebes, respectively. Each ritual element individually communicates his dual nature by assigning him multiple, apparently contradictory roles in that ritual. At the same time, the conflated ritual as a whole amplifies the ambiguity that now more than ever characterizes him. This culminating scene of his life finally offers an answer to the request articulated in his supplication at the beginning of the play and thereby completes the third phase of a rite of passage that has remained open-ended since the prologue, conferring definitive ritual closure on Oedipus' story.

The elements of Greek death ritual are easiest to discern in this final scene and strongly emphasize Oedipus' many contradictory qualities, parallel to those of the Eumenides. Weeping and chest-beating, libations, and the ministrations of female relatives, including washing the body and dressing it in the proper clothing, all contribute to the funeral atmosphere.⁵⁸ In keeping with his characterization throughout the play, Oedipus takes on two different roles in the rituals that accompany his death. On the one hand, he is still a living man and clearly in charge of the unfolding ritual scenario. He takes on the active role of the funeral officiant in this scene. On the other hand, the rituals he directs are all intended to provide appropriate ritual care for his body once he is dead. These rituals also treat him proleptically as a passive participant, as though he were already a corpse.⁵⁹ This conflation of ritual roles communicates Oedipus' deep affinity for the contradictory nature of the Eumenides, especially since these goddesses seem directly implicated in the ritual that unfolds. While some have doubted the importance of the Eumenides in this final scene, particularly since no divinities are invoked by name,⁶⁰ it seems quite likely that the libations in particular are directed to them. Like all chthonic deities, the Eumenides are plausible recipients of any offerings poured out on the ground and, at the same time, are likely to go unnamed in the rituals addressed to them as an apotropaic response to their capacity to harm.⁶¹ Moreover, since the only other context in which libations occur in the play is in the Chorus's description of the purification ritual explicitly intended to appease these goddesses, a prominent ritual moment, the conflation of ritual across the play is likely to put the audience in mind of the Eumenides when libations are mentioned a second time. This aspect of what is, at least in part, a death ritual emphasizes Oedipus' relationship with the goddesses who accept him in this scene, even as his dual role in the ritual emphasizes what he has in common with them.

The aspects of death ritual that portray Oedipus as an incipient cult hero also stress his equivocal characterization, in solidarity with the Eumenides. Critics overwhelmingly agree that his death is that of no mere mortal, destined for the underworld, but rather that of a hero whose death rituals and tomb reflect his super-human status and ongoing presence at his tomb after death.⁶² The treatment of

Oedipus' gravesite suggests most directly the grave of a cult hero. While normally it was the responsibility of family members to care for a relative's tomb, Oedipus dismisses his daughters and allows only Theseus, a civic leader, to know the location of his grave.⁶³ The upkeep of Oedipus' cult is thus removed from the family sphere to the civic sphere, and the ongoing importance of the grave is revealed to be relevant not merely to Oedipus' kin but to the entire community that Theseus rules. Tending to ancestors' graves was an expression of family identity in ancient Greece, but the care of a cult hero's tomb was an expression of local identity and community cohesion.⁶⁴ Oedipus' grave, it is clear, will have this communal importance.

By describing Oedipus' grave in this way, this ritual scene confers on him the same ambiguity that characterized cult heroes more broadly in ancient Greece. Greek heroes existed in the medial space between gods and men; their tombs marked the boundaries between neighboring territories, as Oedipus' will between Thebes and Athens; and their persona was defined by the tension between their capacity to help and their capacity to harm. These characteristics are that much easier to discern in this final ritual scene because they are anticipated earlier in the play. The themes of reciprocity and of helping friends and harming enemies, customarily associated with heroes,⁶⁵ are closely tied to Oedipus in his relationship to his sons, his daughters, Thebes, and Athens. An earlier reference to a time when Oedipus' cold corpse will drink the blood of his Theban enemies (ἴν' οὐμὸς εὔδων καὶ κεκρυμμένος νέκυς / ψυχρὸς ποτ' αὐτῶν θερμὸν αἷμα πίεται, 621–22) in particular emphasizes the "harming enemies" aspect of the cult hero identity that he will take on after his death.⁶⁶ The anticipation and description of his death rites, therefore, endow him with aspects of a cult hero's identity, helping to establish his liminal, ambivalent identity in solidarity with the Eumenides.⁶⁷

In addition to aspects of death ritual, Oedipus' final scene also incorporates elements of mystery-cult initiation, and particularly the Eleusinian mysteries, which bestowed a more blessed afterlife on initiates by having them symbolically undergo the painful transition from sorrow to joy that Demeter experienced in the loss and recovery of Persephone.⁶⁸ Well before the scene of Oedipus' death begins, the Chorus makes the audience more receptive to Eleusinian allusions by mentioning Eumolpidae attendants (προσπόλων Εὐμολπιδῶν, 1053), the hereditary priests of Eleusis, in the ode sung during Theseus' recovery of Antigone and Ismene from the Thebans. There are numerous references to Demeter and Persephone in the play; in particular, the location of Oedipus' final moments are overtly associated with these chthonic goddesses. The narcissus and crocus found in the grove are connected with Demeter and Persephone in an earlier choral ode (681–85); the grove's Thorician stone (1595) makes reference to a deme where Demeter and Persephone had a cult; the mention of an entrance to the underworld in the grove

has clear connections to Persephone's story and, therefore, to the Eleusinian mysteries; and two *scholia* on the *Oedipus at Colonus* associate the spot of Oedipus' disappearance with the abduction of Persephone by Hades.⁶⁹

Even more directly, many individual elements of the ritual surrounding Oedipus' death mimic the experience of Eleusinian initiates. The sudden thunder heralding his death (1456) evokes the cymbals and gongs of Eleusis. Ritual bathing and changing clothes (1597–1604) were also part of the initiation process. The fact that Oedipus receives death rites before he has died may reflect the symbolic but not literal death undergone by initiates at Eleusis. Finally, the secrecy that surrounds the moment of his death and the restriction of those who are permitted to witness it are also evocative of the secrecy surrounding the Eleusinian rites. It is problematic, of course, to identify this ritual too closely with Eleusinian initiation, not least because the rite takes place at Colonus, not Eleusis.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, it seems clear that Eleusis and the character of its initiation rituals are, at the very least, alluded to.

One important poetic outcome of these Eleusinian references is the way in which they illustrate and emphasize Oedipus' contradictory role in the rites, in the same way that aspects of the death ritual describe him as both corpse and mourner. He is, in one sense, an inexperienced initiate, undergoing the necessary rituals in order to have a transformative experience; at the same time, he plays the part of the mystagogue, fully knowledgeable about what is happening and instructing those with him in the correct performance of the rites.⁷¹ With uncanny foreknowledge of the transformation he is about to experience, he guides himself through secret rites that will secure his existence in the afterlife. As both initiate and mystagogue in a ritual that mimics elements of Eleusinian initiation, Oedipus is shown to embody the paradoxical qualities that make his supplication acceptable to the Eumenides. Once again, this final ritual scene serves to underline the ambiguity that he shares with the goddesses who now welcome him.

The mystery references embedded in this scene reinforce Oedipus' contradictory nature all the more because of the extensive similarities between the version of Demeter at the center of the mysteries and the Eumenides at the center of the plot of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Like the Eumenides, the Eleusinian goddess strongly embodies the principles of helping friends and harming enemies; she brings fertility and abundance to the land and has a salvific secret to bestow on those she favors, but she threatens the very order of the universe when she withdraws from Olympus in her eponymous Homeric hymn.⁷² There are also historical links between the cults of Demeter and the Eumenides, which may have strengthened the audience's perception of the ambiguous qualities shared by Demeter, the Eumenides and, in this play, Oedipus himself. Indeed, one of Demeter's cult titles was Demeter Erinys.⁷³ On the basis of these connections between Eleusinian Demeter

and the Eumenides, it seems likely that an Athenian audience would readily understand the elements of mystery initiation in this scene to reinforce Oedipus' close relationship with the Eumenides and their ambivalent character.

Finally, in addition to death rites and mystery cult, Oedipus' final scene incorporates elements of animal sacrifice. In particular, the selection and demarcation of a sacred space, the sprinkling of participants with water, libations, ritual silence followed by the loud wailing of women, and, most obviously, the death of a victim all liken Oedipus' death to that of a sacrificial animal.⁷⁴ While less prominent than the other ritual elements that comprise this scene, aspects of sacrifice nonetheless provide yet another ritual poetic opportunity to stress Oedipus' paradoxical nature as his supplication of the Eumenides is accepted. He is described in both the role of officiant and the role of victim in the scene and thereby becomes an idealized scapegoat; his death brings benefit and cohesion to the Athenian community but without requiring that another person wield the knife and so incur additional pollution. Oedipus is both guilty, as the author of his own death, and innocent, since he goes willingly to his death and harms no one but himself as a consequence of his ritual actions.⁷⁵ The ambiguity of Oedipus' role in his own metaphorical sacrifice illustrates, now in a third way, the contradictions inherent in his character. By adopting an apparently impossible combination of roles in his final scene, he demonstrates his unity with the Eumenides as he, finally, is invited to join them in the liminal space between Athens and Thebes.

Each ritual element in Oedipus' final scene—death rites, mystery initiation, and animal sacrifice—offers poetic clues about his character and future status. However, the conflation of all three types of ritual into a unified ritual communication amplifies the poetic effect of this scene and strengthens the projection of his anticipated postliminal status, particularly his great affinity for the new group with which he will henceforth be affiliated. Indeed, by conflating all three types of ritual into a single ritual scene, the combined ritual can be framed in such a way that its core poetic message is reinforced even further. For example, the second half of the ritual scene, after Oedipus leaves the stage with Theseus, is described by a messenger. As Pat Easterling perceptively notes, the three-actor rule means that the messenger would have been played by the same actor who had been playing Oedipus throughout the play. The messenger thus speaks quite literally with the voice of the now-absent Oedipus.⁷⁶ In yet another example of apparent contradiction in this scene, Oedipus both is and is not on the stage. The ambiguous character he shares with the Eumenides is thus further emphasized. A similar emphasis on his dual nature is achieved through his exit from the stage, as David Wiles suggests. Over the course of the play, the right and left exits from the stage are identified with Athens and Thebes, respectively.⁷⁷ Oedipus enters unambiguously from the

Theban side, but Wiles contends that he exits not on the Athenian side but rather through the *skene*, choosing neither right nor left. Such an exit physically and literally locates him in the medial space between Athens and Thebes.⁷⁸ The very structure of the scene built around his final ritual moments reflects the liminality of the Eumenides themselves and, by extension, Oedipus' identification with them as he leaves the human sphere. The last image Sophocles offers of this ritual, Theseus' salute to sky and earth (1654–55), offers a final visual expression of the themes of contradiction and complementarity that the rest of the ritual scene has clearly brought out.

All of this taken together offers a resounding answer to the question raised by Oedipus' initial supplication: Will the Eumenides accept Oedipus? The final ritual scene offers the audience an emphatic yes. A great variety of ritual elements work together in the *Oedipus at Colonus* to guide the play's titular character to this extraordinary end and to shape the audience's perception of his progress toward this goal. By incorporating problems of ritual repetition, ritual status, and ritual conflation into Oedipus' story, unifying them through the overarching motif of supplication, this play offers its audience a clean and satisfying ritual resolution to the problem posed in its prologue: What is to become of Oedipus? The complexity of Sophocles' use of ritual to shape the audience's perception of Oedipus' transformation and ritual death offers an intricate solution equal to the complexities of his myth and character.

Epilogue

The ritual death of Oedipus brings his story to a satisfying end, offering perhaps the only definitive moment of closure in the Sophoclean corpus. The close analogy between this moment and Aeschylus' portrayal of the acceptance of the Eumenides in Athens—strongly closural because it is the final event in a complete, connected trilogy—intertextually reinforces the sense of an ending at this juncture.⁷⁹ While the play could end here, Sophocles has chosen to give Oedipus' story an epilogue, and this must be accounted for within the ritual framework that has guided the play to this point. The play has, for the most part, focused on Oedipus' contradictory nature and the way in which he embraces conflicting identities as he grows closer to the Eumenides. Once he has left the stage, the tension between these divergent aspects of his identity is amplified because they are represented by characters that fit into only one category or the other. With Oedipus' death and the loss of the only character truly able to mediate between binary opposites, the remaining characters are divided by their irreconcilable differences.

In particular, the play's *exodos* emphasizes the sharp distinction between those Oedipus' spirit will harm and those he will help. Through repeated acts of supplication in this play, Oedipus has come to exist in the interstitial space between Athens and Thebes. Just like the Eumenides, whose company he joins in the final conflated ritual of his life, he is able to transcend opposition. His great success in this sphere sharpens the audience's perception that the other characters in the play are unable to achieve such transcendence and must choose one side or the other, Athens or Thebes, rather than achieving a compromise between the two. This difference between Oedipus and the other characters becomes clear, as did his own status, through ritual signals.

At the end of the play, Antigone and Ismene remain closely aligned with Thebes. Their ritual status is expressed through lament, a ritual that communicates a lack of closure in their experience at the end of the play, by contrast with Oedipus' definitive ritual death. Finding no solace in their grieving, they express only frustration that they will not be able to perform the burial rites for Oedipus that would normally bring their lament to a natural end. Much like Electra in her Sophoclean play, Antigone and Ismene communicate their *aporia* at the loss of their father through continual weeping.⁸⁰ By contrast, the Athenian characters, Theseus and the Chorus, enjoy a sense of ritual closure not available to Oedipus' daughters. Oedipus is buried permanently in Attic soil, and the secret of his location is entrusted to the king for the benefit of all Athenians. The ritual security the Athenian characters evidently feel is clear in their calm, confident instructions to Ismene and Antigone, despite the girls' unrestrained weeping. Without the mediating presence of Oedipus, the gulf between Thebes and Athens could not be wider.

This symbolic distance is crystallized in the final ritual act of the play: appropriately, one last act of supplication. Antigone begs Theseus (προσπίτνομέν, 1754) on behalf of herself and Ismene to reveal the location of Oedipus' tomb. Theseus acknowledges the request and responds with the following words:

ὦ παῖδες, ἀπεῖπεν ἔμοι κείνος
μήτε πελάζειν ἐς τοῦσδε τόπους
μήτ' ἐπιφωνεῖν μηδένα θνητῶν
θήκην ἱεράν, ἣν κείνος ἔχει.
καὶ ταῦτά μ' ἔφη πρᾶσσοντα κακῶν
χώραν ἔξιν αἰὲν ἄλυστον.
ταῦτ' οὖν ἔκλυεν δαίμων ἡμῶν
χὼ πάντ' αἰὼν Διὸς Ὅρκος.

(1760–67)

[Children, that man told me not to go near to the place or tell any mortal about the holy tomb, which he inhabits. And he said that if I did these things, I would always keep my country free from misfortune and grief. The god, all-seeing Oath, son of Zeus, heard these things from me.]

Theseus appeals to the only thing that he and Oedipus' daughters have in common now: a prior connection to Oedipus himself. On the strength of this shared connection, Antigone agrees with Theseus, "If this is in accordance with that man's intention, it suffices" (ἀλλ' εἰ τὰδ' ἔχει κατὰ νοῦν κείνῳ / ταῦτ' ἂν ἀπαρκοῖ· 1768–69). With Oedipus no longer present, nothing holds the Athenian and Theban characters together. This final ritual supplication enacts their formal separation.

Theseus' refusal of the girls' supplication, and their acceptance of his answer, prompts them to ask to be sent to Thebes (1769–72), a request Theseus is only too happy to grant because it is, as he says, amenable to Oedipus' spirit (1773–76). Sending them to Thebes, where they will be subject to the effects of Oedipus' curses, might seem, at first glance, to contradict the promise that he extracted from Theseus to care for his daughters after his death (1631–35). However, the ritual logic of the play overrides the affection Oedipus clearly retains for his daughters in the moments before his death. He asks Theseus to care for girls who, this dramatic epilogue clearly demonstrates, are Theban and not Athenian. Oedipus' final request of Theseus mistakenly presupposes that his daughters have undergone the same change of status that he has undergone, including ritual acceptance at Athens. Theseus' negative answer to the girls' suppliant request and subsequent agreement to send them back to Thebes emphasize Oedipus' extraordinary achievement in transcending his civic and familial origins. Despite Oedipus' good will toward them, his daughters have not achieved the same. "To whoever is aware of the result," Jan Kamerbeek suggests—and the evidence of Aeschylus' *Septem*, Euripides' *Phoenissae*, and Sophocles' own *Antigone* confirms that the vast majority of the audience would have been aware of the result—"it will be clear how tragic a note is struck at the end of this play."⁸¹ This final act of supplication highlights the discrete identities of the characters remaining on the stage, in sharp contrast with Oedipus' exceptional multivalence. The division between blessed Athens and cursed Thebes is ominously clear as the *Oedipus at Colonus* comes to a close. Antigone and Ismene exist on one side of that divide, Theseus and the Chorus on the other. Oedipus and the Eumenides reside ambiguously in the middle.

It is well worth asking why ritual problems yield ritual resolution in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, whereas in the other plays we have considered in depth, ritual problems yield only further problems (*Ajax* and *Electra*) or point to future resolution that is

not achieved within the play itself (*Philoctetes*). While it is tempting to see the late *Oedipus at Colonus* as the teleological culmination of Sophocles' literary career, this kind of biographical reading is suspect and, ultimately, unnecessary to account for the transcendence that Oedipus seems to attain in this play. In spite of Oedipus' personal achievement, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, like all of Sophocles' plays, offers not a definitive ending but rather a new beginning. The play clearly looks forward to both the battle of the Seven against Thebes and the events of Sophocles' own *Antigone*. The end that Oedipus achieves in this play is, indeed, extraordinary, but the anticlosural function of ritual, as expressed by Antigone's supplication of Theseus and the unambiguous foreshadowing of future events at Thebes, operates in the same way in this play as it does in the others we have examined. Ritual ultimately points beyond the end of the play and does not offer full and secure closure within the limits of the drama. As Chris Carey comments, "[Nothing] in the play is offered as the last word."⁸²

But what, then, of Oedipus and the definitive closure that he achieves? Oedipus' end is different from that of the other Sophoclean heroes because the play so clearly shows the way in which he transcends the human condition. Oedipus will have no future need to negotiate a place for himself in any community through ritual, because the place he achieves among the Eumenides is permanent, exceptional, and, most importantly, clearly removed from the human sphere. At the moment of his death, Oedipus is whisked away into an infernal realm that cannot be depicted or even described onstage; his future depends in no way on other people. Unlike Ajax, he has no need of the benevolence of the Greeks to secure his burial. Unlike Electra and Orestes, he will not have to face the potential vengeance of the children whose parents he has murdered. Unlike Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, he has no need to travel to Troy or to integrate into the Greek army to reinforce commitments made in the isolation of Lemnos. And unlike his daughters, he will not be forced to choose between Eteocles' Thebans and Polyneices' Argives. Even Athens, the blessed beneficiary of Oedipus' future favor, will eventually come to war with Thebes (616–20). But Oedipus remains above any such human concerns. Indeed, he will henceforth have an entirely different relationship to ritual activity. Whereas he once depended on the gods as guarantors and respondents in his ritual actions, like any other human, he has now become the divine guarantor and possesses the ability to respond to ritual requests himself.

Oedipus does not achieve closure through ritual, whose purpose is to facilitate human community; rather, he achieves it by breaking free of human community and a human role in ritual. Only here in the plays of Sophocles does ritual effect a rite of passage that completely removes its participant from human association.⁸³ In Sophocles' final play, Oedipus is integrated into a community of extraordinary

divine beings who exist outside the realm of human concerns. For everybody else, Sophocles' plays imply, the necessity of finding a secure place in a community is an ongoing and inevitable concern. The human condition does not permit such supernatural closure as Oedipus achieves.

Human life, as van Gennep observes, is in essence a series of transitions; the ritual structure of the rite of passage eases these frequent and often difficult changes by facilitating the move to *communitas* and back to structure. An examination of the plays of Sophocles through the lens of ritual poetics suggests that the playwright understood this sentiment well. While he hints at the possibility of escaping the cycle of transitions for the extraordinary few, he also seems to offer solace to those not destined for the extraordinary by presenting ritual as a way of managing one's place within a community and negotiating transitions from one community to another. For the fifth-century audience observing such negotiations in Sophocles' plays, ritual and its symbolic poetics offered a means of understanding both the transitions portrayed on the dramatic stage and the transitions of their own lives.



Conclusion

Ritual and Closure

τέλος δ' ἔθηκε Ζεὺς ἀγώνιος καλῶς, / εἰ δὲ καλῶς.

[Zeus, decider of contests, brought about a good end, if indeed it was good.]

Trach. 26–27

In the preceding chapters we have seen that ritual and drama are governed by the same three broadly conceived principles. Both entail a predictable progression, both implicate their participants or characters in a change of status, and in both that change of status is typically reflected in community membership. These principles are common to the tragic theory of Aristotle and the ritual theories of van Gennep and Turner. As a result of these shared characteristics, rituals embedded in a tragic narrative influence the audience's perceptions and expectations of the plot and characters. Joe Park Poe puts it well when he says in reference to the *Ajax*, "Tragic drama resembles ritual not only in providing an emotional focus for an assembly of people. It also contains a number of conventions of various kinds which the spectators implicitly anticipate and the perception of which they share."¹ Because of these shared conventions, which form the basis for deep structural similarities, ritual in a dramatic context can be evaluated as a poetic device in its own right and invites the application of a theory of ritual poetics. In the Sophoclean corpus, what we observe most often on the level of ritual are mistakes and deviations from the norm. In particular, Sophocles' plays incorporate rituals that are conflated, that repeat excessively, and that involve participants who do not have the status necessary for legitimate participation in the ritual in question. These

mistakes influence the way spectators interpret individual scenes, larger segments of narrative, and even entire plays.

In the *Ajax*, ritual conflation contributes to the ambiguous characterization of the title character, explaining his failure to integrate into any community, including the world of the dead, over the course of the play. At the same time, the conflation of the play's rituals highlights the overarching progression in the drama from most to least complete ritual, describing a backward rite of passage and undermining closure at the end of the play. The *Electra* demonstrates Sophocles' most extensive use of ritual repetition in the construction of plot. In this play, the polluted death of Iphigenia serves as a catalyst for an apparently endless series of subsequent deaths. In each one, the corrupt or incomplete nature of some part of an earlier death ritual provides the impetus for further murder, which perpetuates the cycle apparently indefinitely. The *Philoctetes* explores the ritual actions of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, who lack ritual status as exile and youth, respectively, but whose interactions play out in the ritually permissive isolation of Lemnos. The play creates interest by playing on the tension between the dramatic expectation that their ritual actions should succeed and the ritual expectation that they should fail. The arrival of Heracles in the *exodos* reconciles these conflicting expectations and lends legitimacy to the play's so-called second ending. All three kinds of ritual mistakes are implicated in the suppliant motif that informs the plot of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. In this play, successive iterations of suppliant ritual communicate small changes in Oedipus' relationships with Athens and Thebes until the Eumenides are prepared to offer an affirmative response to his initial request. His conflated death ritual reflects the ambiguous nature of the goddesses he now joins as a result of his initial supplication.

Stated simply, the application of ritual poetics to the plays of Sophocles elucidates the poetic role that ritual plays in the corpus. This book emphasizes the way in which ritual contributes to characterization and, especially, the way in which it informs plot development and narrative structure. However, it also hints at many other avenues of potential exploration guided by ritual poetics, from scene construction to the role of the Chorus. In this brief conclusion, I return to some of the details I have already discussed in order to illustrate that one particularly promising application of ritual poetics involves the thorny question of dramatic closure.² The endings of Sophocles' plays are notoriously difficult: ambiguous, unsettling, and often apparently lacking in closure. The interpretation of the ending is central in the scholarship on each of the plays. By way of conclusion, then, I revisit one aspect of my analysis of the plays and draw out the utility of ritual poetics in achieving a better, more concrete understanding of Sophoclean closure.

I am by no means the first to broach the topic of closure in Sophocles' plays. As we have already seen in considering the ending of the *Ajax*, plays that end with ritual, especially funeral rites, are often characterized as offering closure, while plays that fail to arrange for such rites are read as correspondingly lacking in closure (see "The End" in chapter 2). Segal argues persuasively that such closing rituals contribute to the collective aspects of what Aristotle describes as catharsis, moving the audience from a focus on the individual to a focus on collective healing.³ Nearly all of Sophocles' plays—the exception is the *Philoctetes*—end with either funeral rites or their conspicuous absence, which means that Sophoclean drama is frequently implicated in discussions of ritual and catharsis. Although the conceit is more common in Euripidean endings,⁴ Sophoclean plays that suggest a future hero cult as one outcome of the play's action are also considered in the context of work on closure. The promise of future cult activity has been argued to affect the audience's experience of the play's conclusion by providing a clear link between the dramatic events and a ritual future familiar to the audience.⁵ Finally, as Deborah Roberts has convincingly argued, all of Sophocles' plays are to some extent anticlosural because their endings consistently allude to the future beyond the end of the play, denying that the end of the drama is the end of the story. By forcing his audience to look ahead, Roberts argues, Sophocles complicates its ability to render final judgment at the end of the drama, with the result that it perceives the ending as provisional.⁶

While all these perspectives offer valuable insight into the audience experience of Sophoclean closure, they all focus on the final scene in each play. My contention is that in order to understand Sophoclean closure fully, particularly from a ritual perspective, it is necessary to take the ritual content of the entire play into account. The rituals with which the plays of Sophocles end, regardless of how complete or correct they may be, are meaningful not just in themselves but also because they are connected to earlier rituals. If we consider the corpus as a whole, it becomes clear that the final ritual in each play, whether it offers closure in and of itself, is always revealed to be anticlosural when read in the context of the ritual content of the entire drama. While there may be other closural elements in any given *exodos*, rituals consistently undermine dramatic closure in Sophocles and complicate any simplistic ending that the play may appear to offer by alluding to the rituals that the audience has already witnessed.

The *exodos* of the *Ajax* incorporates ritual through Teucer's instructions for the preliminary phase of his half brother's burial. As we have seen, the anticipated funerary rites are the third major ritual action in the play, following the slaughter of the herds and Ajax's suicide, which are both ritualized to resemble animal sacrifice. When considered in light of these earlier rituals, the incipient burial has two

principal implications for the audience's perception of the final scene. First, the proposed funeral evokes elements of earlier rituals. The pollution and ritual corruption of the play's earlier scenes are introduced into the *exodos* through ritual conflation, foregrounding the likelihood that the present ritual will follow the same perverted course as the previous ones. Second, the preparations for Ajax's funeral represent the final phase in a rite of passage that has progressed backward through the play. The drama moves from a focus on the postliminal in part I of the play, to the liminal in part II, to the preliminary in part III. The rituals presented to the audience are, therefore, less and less complete as the play progresses. On the level of narrative, Ajax's burial represents a logical response to the events of the play and offers the kind of ritual closure discussed by Segal.⁷ On the level of ritual, however, the incipient funeral raises more problems than it resolves, paradoxically undermining the closure that burial would normally offer. Though the fifth-century audience would have been aware of Ajax's future hero cult in Athens, the end of his eponymous play fights against that knowledge rather than reinforcing it, generating an uncertainty that Sophocles might have exploited in the subsequent two plays of the trilogy.

In the *Electra*, the repetition of ritual action encourages the audience to develop strong narrative expectations that are continually confirmed as the plot plays out. Beginning with the death of Iphigenia, with its antecedents in the impious history of the House of Atreus, the play describes and enacts a series of murders followed by corrupt or incomplete funerary rituals. Nearly all subsequent murders are ritualized to resemble the initial act of corrupt sacrifice. In each case, the corruption of the rituals surrounding one death are causally linked to the next murder in the sequence. While each act of murder differs in its details and the perversion of ritual elements is unique to each death, the essential pattern is consistent. As a result, each time the audience anticipates further death and further corruption, its expectations are rewarded. The play comes to an end just after Clytemnestra's death and just before Aegisthus'. Although the play's silence on Clytemnestra's funeral in this scene certainly contributes to a lack of dramatic closure,⁸ the ritual elements that are presented in this final scene suggest in broad terms how such a funeral is likely to unfold. Since both Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' murders partake in the repeating sequence of corrupt deaths and death rituals shown in this play—indeed, Clytemnestra's corpse is used to deceive and ultimately capture Aegisthus—the audience's expectations of what comes next are determined by the parameters of this repeating ritual pattern. If the pattern holds, and the *exodos* offers no reason to think it will not, then the only possible future is the violent and polluted death of Aegisthus, violence and pollution that will eventually rebound on those responsible for it. The play ultimately lacks closure because its conclusion so strongly affirms

the continuation of the cyclical violence that defines the House of Atreus after the play comes to an end.

The ending of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* has generated a great deal of scholarship focused on the perceived inconsistency between the *exodos* and the rest of the play. Such concerns focus on the clash between the oracular instructions to banish or kill Laius' murderer and Creon's instructions to Oedipus to return to the palace at the end of the play.⁹ Approaching this problem from the perspective of ritual poetics helps to make sense of this perplexing inconsistency. I have already shown that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* features a repetitive cycle of oracles ignored with disastrous consequence. Creon's decision not to banish Oedipus immediately but rather to send to Delphi for further oracular instruction is inconsistent only when evaluated in relation to the most recent oracle. When his actions are considered in light of the long sequence of oracles reported in the play, his decision to defer the oracle's fulfillment is consistent with the established ritual pattern. The *exodos* of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, therefore, denies complete closure through its ritual components even as it confirms the apparently inescapable cycle in which the Theban royal household is caught.¹⁰ This reading is affirmed in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Sophocles demonstrates how Oedipus finally escapes this cycle. He disassociates himself almost completely from Thebes by fully embracing rather than avoiding the prophecy about his acceptance among the Eumenides, while his children, who remain strongly tied to the city, continue to suffer the effects of the family curse.

The character of the ending of the *Antigone*, much like the ending of the *Electra* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, is determined by the force of repetitive ritual patterns that have shaped the play's narrative throughout. Most overtly, as we have already seen, the play focuses on the repetition of corrupt and failed burial rituals, one leading reliably to the next. The play also repeats the conflation of marriage and death. These separate spheres blur together just before Antigone is led off to die in the cave and twice more in the play: first, when Haemon dies by a suicide described with highly erotic language (1236–39) as his attainment of marriage rites (τὰ νυμφικὰ / τέλη λαχόν, 1240–41); and, second, when Eurydice reacts to the news of one son's death by lamenting the empty marriage bed of the other (κενὸν λέχος, 1303). Both of these repeating patterns are alluded to in the play's *exodos* even though the scene does not stage any ritual content beyond Creon's lament. Creon's failure to address the need to bury Eurydice certainly denies the audience immediate ritual catharsis, but the play's lack of secure closure is also reinforced by the ritual implication that whenever Eurydice is buried, her funeral will perpetuate the pattern of corrupt burials that have so far punctuated the plot of the *Antigone*. More speculatively, the audience might also perceive a lack of closure as the play encourages them to anticipate further iterations of the conflated marriage and death motif

beyond the end of the play. As a direct result of Eurydice's suicide, and with no remaining sons, Creon has no option but to marry Ismene himself if he wishes to keep the family line intact. Since the mythology concerning Ismene after the events of this play is so murky, an audience might very well have imagined her in the role of bride of Hades, choosing death rather than submission to her uncle's demands, just as Antigone did. This interpretation is encouraged by Ismene's earlier desire to share in Antigone's punishment, even though she initially refused to partake in the crime (531–60). Although the final scene of the *Antigone* avoids direct ritual content or commentary, it still alludes to the problematic ritual patterns that have informed the plot and denies closure by implying their continuation.

The ambiguity at the end of the *Trachiniae* is tied to the ritualized depiction of Heracles' suffering. His status has been characterized throughout the play by a confusion between life and death, a confusion closely tied to a prophecy that foretells two very different futures—he will either end his life in suffering or enjoy a peaceful and prosperous existence—without offering any way of anticipating which will come to pass. Heracles' final moments onstage are characterized by elements of sacrificial ritual, which contribute to his ambiguous portrayal. Since this last scene is conflated both with Heracles' sacrifice at Cenaean and with Deianeira's sacrificial suicide, the ritual evokes two contradictory possibilities: that Heracles will survive, as he did before; and that he will achieve release through death, like Deianeira. The ambiguity of Heracles' position in this final scene is deepened by his simultaneous portrayal as the sacrificial victim in his suffering and as the officiant in his attempt to direct the proceedings, conflicting ritual roles that correspond to the prophecy's ambiguous predictions and that make it even more difficult for the audience to reconcile the hero's two possible futures. What does await the hero beyond the end of the play is an extraordinary transformation from demigod to god that will, in fact, fulfill both sets of conflicting expectations. Heracles' mortal self will perish on the funeral pyre, while his divine self will ascend to Olympus to assume his place beside Zeus. An audience aware of this mythological future might have envisaged the closure awaiting Heracles, though this resolution is not forthcoming within the bounds of the play. More importantly, this resolution is available to Heracles only; the presence of Hyllus, who is unambiguously mortal unlike his father, emphasizes the lack of closure available on the mortal plane on which this play unfolds. Heracles may in the future be able to transcend the ambiguities of the human condition, as many of the play's rituals intimate, but Hyllus, who is excluded from both the prophecy and participation in Heracles' final ritual, will be left to attempt to reconcile the ambivalent feelings he surely has about marrying the woman indirectly responsible for the death of both of his parents. In light of the rituals that have occurred earlier in the play, Heracles' anticipated

apotheosis offers a strong contrast to the ambiguity of the situation he will leave behind him, denying the audience closure.

Part of what denies completely satisfying closure at the end of the *Philoctetes* is the fact that the play offers its audience two contrasting endings: Neoptolemus' agreement to accompany Philoctetes home to Mount Oeta, despite the necessity of fighting at Troy, and Philoctetes' agreement to join the war effort after all, as prompted by Heracles. Although the arrival of Heracles and his instructions supersede the agreement Philoctetes and Neoptolemus initially reach, the first ending still has important implications for the audience's interpretation of the play's ending. This initial agreement is possible only because Neoptolemus returns Philoctetes' bow, a symbolic return to the conditions at the beginning of the play and a clear indication that both characters retain their respectively problematic ritual identities, Neoptolemus as uninitiated youth and Philoctetes as exile. This affirmation of their problematic ritual statuses confirms that although Neoptolemus and Philoctetes may be able to make ritually sound agreements in the isolated environment of Lemnos, these agreements cannot stand once these characters rejoin the "real world" unless both of them affirm their agreements after gaining legitimate status by the standards of Greek society. In light of the still-problematic ritual status of both characters, Heracles' appearance contributes to closure in this play in two ways. He validates the audience's dramatic expectations by upholding Neoptolemus' and Philoctetes' obligations as well as the prophetic demand that Philoctetes fight at Troy. At the same time, he validates the audience's ritual expectations by insisting that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes must leave the social, geographic, and religious isolation in which the play has unfolded and by predicting the necessary ritual integration each will experience upon arrival at Troy. This projected resolution, satisfying as it is, does not stage closure in front of the audience but rather points to closure that will be achieved only after the play ends in a completely new social, geographic, and ritual locus. Given that the play has relied for dramatic effect on the audience's knowledge that Philoctetes did eventually fight at Troy, it is possible that the audience is also encouraged to anticipate what eventually transpired there, particularly Neoptolemus' terrible impieties during the sack of Ilium.¹¹ Ultimately, the ending of the *Philoctetes* resolves the specific issues raised in the play but denies complete closure by its insistent references to the future and the ongoing stories of these characters.¹²

Of all of Sophocles' plays, the *Oedipus at Colonus* offers the most secure sense of closure to its audience through the fate of its title character. Oedipus' end is projected almost as soon as the play begins, as he recognizes the grove of the Eumenides as the place where the Pythia has predicted he will end his life. After his initial supplication of these goddesses, iterations of the suppliant motif steadily

move him closer and closer to his ultimate goal until his ritual acceptance among the Eumenides is finally enacted and the expectations raised through his ritual actions in the prologue are completely satisfied. Oedipus achieves closure not only through his death but, even more definitively, by leaving the human sphere entirely, joining the Eumenides rather than descending to the underworld. While he achieves closure through his ritual transformation, however, ritual does not provide closure to the other characters. The last one hundred lines of the play undermine the reassurance of Oedipus' final scene, not by questioning the closure that he has achieved but rather by highlighting the open-ended stories of those characters who remain onstage. Supplication ritual, which has pointed clearly to Oedipus' death so far, now points just as clearly beyond the end of the play. Theseus looks forward to passing on the secret of Oedipus' tomb to an unbroken line of descendants; Antigone and Ismene, though they beg Theseus in one final act of supplication to share this knowledge, are excluded from this blessed Athenian future. Their ritual lament anticipates the disaster that the audience knows awaits them when they return to Thebes, a homecoming that Theseus promises to facilitate.¹³ The end of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, therefore, lacks a strong sense of closure because of the sharp contrast between Oedipus' ritual transcendence and the open-ended stories of all the other characters, as stressed by the play's final ritual gesture.

What broader conclusions should we draw from this survey of ritual elements in Sophoclean endings? In a formal sense, both narrative and ritual have a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end and are limited, teleological structures. The structural similarities between ritual and narrative in this respect mean that ritual can help an audience to understand the significance of the formal end of a play's narrative even if that ending does not offer secure dramatic closure. Ritual, with its defined parameters and predictable progression, gives the ritually knowledgeable audience access to information that may not be available explicitly in the script or onstage, helping it to think through the implications of the way in which the play ends. Peter Brooks, reading with Roland Barthes, suggests that when we experience a narrative we are always actively looking for an ending that confers meaning on the beginning and the middle.¹⁴ This, I think, is one legitimate way of reading the plays of Sophocles and the message communicated by the rituals incorporated into their dramatic conclusions. Ritual cues, by evoking the play's earlier rituals, encourage the audience to see these endings as disquieting, ambiguous, and, with the possible exception of the *Philoctetes*, tragic in an affective way, in addition to the formal and generic characteristics that make the play tragic. In this respect, Sophoclean rituals affirm a concept fundamental to Greek thought, expressed perhaps most famously in Solon's advice to Croesus to look to the end of his life before judging his own happiness (Hdt. 1.32). This philosophy is echoed by

Sophocles' characters more than once—by Deianeira in the opening of the *Trachiniae* (1–3), by Oedipus to Theseus in the *Oedipus at Colonus* (607–23), and in the Chorus's final words at the end of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1528–30)—suggesting that the playwright was well aware of this traditional advice.

The conventional wisdom that the end confers meaning on what precedes it may explain the effect of the rituals in Sophoclean *exodoi* to some extent but does not, I believe, tell the full story. Even though narrative and ritual can both be understood in this teleological way, at the same time both also imply a continuity beyond their finite progression from beginning to middle to end. Every narrative presupposes what happened before the beginning of the story, and the lives of the characters do not stop simply because the narrative does. And while any given ritual has clear boundaries, and its individual beginning, middle, and end can be defined, rituals take place in the context of a larger societal construct in which the continual alternation of structure and *communitas* continually necessitates new ritual progressions. In this respect, it is fair to say that no story ever really offers a secure sense of closure and that the advice to “look to the end” is somewhat misleading. As such, one important function of the rituals found in the *exodoi* of Sophocles' plays is to affirm that the end is not, in fact, the end. As Roberts suggests, “for both audience and characters ending is itself an issue in tragedy, where we are persistently told and shown that we cannot judge lives or actions until we see how they end. Our inability to be sure that an end is really an *end* renders this project of judgment doubly difficult. We must postpone judgment; can we ever be sure we have postponed it far enough?”¹⁵

In each of the seven extant dramas, ritual confirms that there can be no definitive endpoint to any human endeavor and that true closure requires leaving the human sphere altogether. The Heracles of the *Trachiniae* comes close to escaping the human condition in his play, but, ultimately, it is only the Oedipus of the *Oedipus at Colonus* who is shown to succeed in this capacity. And even this modicum of closure is undermined by the *exodos* of that play, which confirms in the strongest terms possible that although the Athenian characters may look forward to a future of prosperity and security, Oedipus' family will not be spared their bleak Theban future. However, even as ritual is used to communicate the impossibility of closure, the ritual content in the final scenes of each of the plays of Sophocles, drawing on the ritual content of all the previous scenes, suggests a strategy for coping with this lack of closure. Ritual offers not an end but a way to anticipate, understand, and negotiate what the future inevitably holds.

The rituals found in the Sophoclean corpus allow the audience to anticipate not only what will happen in the play but also what will happen beyond the end of it. It is possible that Sophocles' fifth-century audience would have perceived that

the predictable progressions of drama and ritual and their central concern with identity and community equally suggest strategies for anticipating and contending with the vicissitudes of real life. Although the stories told in tragedy unfold in the distant mythical past and the parallels with contemporary Athens are imperfect, the rituals performed in them correspond quite closely to the rituals of the audience's historical reality. While these rituals seldom offer a means of altering the future or warding off the inevitable, they do offer a framework within which to better understand the implications of even the most complicated and ambiguous experiences. In this respect we might even say that Sophocles offers an addendum to the traditional advice to "look to the end" in his plays. A reading of the Sophoclean corpus guided by ritual poetics suggests that Sophocles, in weaving rituals into the fabric of his dramas, presents his audience with a model of predictability and continuity that offers a way of coping with the lack of closure that defines not just tragedy but also the human condition.

Notes

Introduction

1. On ritualization, see Bell 1992, 74.
2. See especially Segal 1996; also Hinden 1974, 364; Segal 1981, 18–19; Seaford 1994, 343; Falkner 1999, 176; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 299; Bierl 2007, 31; Vinh 2011, 326; Rehm 2012, 415.
3. See, for example, Zeitlin 1970, 363–64; Hinden 1974, 364; Segal 1981, 7; 1986, 69; 1996, 157; Burkert 1985b, 6–7; Foley 1985, 34–39; Seaford 1994, 343–44; Lloyd-Jones 1998a, 276; Bierl 2007, 31; des Bouvrie 2011, 140–44. Though focused on choral hymns and not tragedy, Kowalzig (2007, 34–35) offers a similar evaluation of the community-building properties of ritual.
4. See Segal 1981, 40, 138; 1996, 157; Burkert 1985b, 7; Foley 1985, 59; Seaford 1994, xi–xii; Lloyd-Jones 1998a, 276–80; Rehm 2012, 414–16.
5. Aristotle was the first that we know of to suggest the connection (*Poet.* 1449a7–15), and the notion was fully developed by the so-called Cambridge Ritualists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including, among others, Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, and Francis Cornford. More recent views can be found in Burkert 1966 and Sourvinou-Inwood 2003. More briefly, see Friedrich 1983, 174; 1996, 271–72; Seaford 1994, 235–80; Sourvinou-Inwood 1994; Henrichs 1994/95; Segal 1995, 180; Krummen 1998, 325; Lloyd-Jones 1998a, 275–77; Braungart 2007, 363; Vinh 2011, 326. For a dissenting opinion, see Scullion 2002.
6. Easterling (1993, 8–9; 2004) is one of the main proponents of this view. See also Foley 1985, 63–64; Krummen 1998, 325; Woodruff 2008, 109; Rehm 2012, 424.
7. See Zeitlin 1970, 5; Segal 1981, 18; Burkert 1985a, 54; 1985b, 20; Easterling 1996, 180; Krummen 1998, 299; Alexiou 2004, 96; Henrichs 2004; Sourvinou-Inwood 2004, 161. See also Kowalzig 2007, 40–42, with a focus on choral hymns.
8. Zeitlin 1970, 344–67.
9. Zeitlin 1965, 1966.
10. See chapter 3.
11. Krummen 1998, especially 296–301.
12. See chapter 2.
13. Henrichs 2004.
14. Henrichs 2004, 198.

15. It is important to stress at this point that I have no wish to entangle myself in unverifiable assertions about what Sophocles intended to do. There is no reliable means of reconstructing his poetic intentions, and I do not claim to know what they were. However, Sophocles' plays were staged in the context of a festival that incorporated many ritual components. Beyond the theater, the social and political world of ancient Athens was steeped in ritual, both in reality and in mimetic representations in literary and other artistic contexts, from the Homeric epics to the Parthenon frieze. Sophocles and his audience, in other words, shared an extensive knowledge of ritual based on repeated exposure. It seems unlikely that he would not have been attuned to the possibilities open to him on the basis of this common knowledge. However, even if his use of ritual is entirely accidental, which seems doubtful, my fundamental claim that the theatrical experience of the ancient audience would have been affected by the ritual content of his plays is unaltered.

16. I will not attempt any comprehensive description of modern work on theories of ritual. Bell 1997, Kreinath et al. 2006, and Stausberg 2009 each offer a helpful starting point for those wishing to become better acquainted with the hugely diverse work that has been done in this area.

17. Cf. Grimes's (1990, 13–14) list of ritual characteristics or Elsbee's (1991, 7–9) use of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances. Bell (1992, 69) speaks eloquently to the difficulty of trying to define all ritual by means of a single universal construct. See also Tambiah 1980, 116; Snoek 2006.

18. Cf. the definitions offered by Luhmann 1984, 9–10; Bell 1992, 88–93; 1997, 81–82; Rappaport 1999, 24.

19. Grimes 2000, 259–62.

20. See especially Burkert 1985a; Parker 1996, 2005, 2011; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003; Mikalson 2010.

21. See especially Parker 1983; Bushnell 1988; Watson 1991; Pulleyn 1997; Alexiou 2002; Dodd and Faraone 2003; Naiden 2006, 2013; Rosenberger 2013; Sommerstein and Torrance 2014.

22. See especially Zeitlin 1970, 18–35.

23. Zeitlin 1970, 41–42.

24. I consider only the complete extant plays of Sophocles in my examination of the corpus, excluding the extensive fragments that have been preserved. As I will show, one of the defining features of ritual in a dramatic context is that it evokes a predictable progression that has clear connections to the progression of the plot of the play. Such a progression is usually all but impossible to reconstruct with any certainty in the fragmentary plays, and so I leave this evidence aside.

25. This is essentially the working definition of ritual employed by Barbara Goff in her study of specifically female ritual practice in ancient Greece. As Goff (2004, 15) explains, "For the purposes of constructing a database and organizing the field, I have adopted a very broad definition: 'women's ritual practice' is whatever women do that constructs for them a relation to the divine."

26. The gods do, of course, perform rituals elsewhere in Greek literature, typically in situations that do not involve human characters. For example, Thetis supplicates Zeus in *Iliad* 1, and Hermes swears oaths to Apollo in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.

27. When they do, it is always in connection with ritual activity. Athena appears to Ajax when he offers her the first fruits of his ritualized slaughter of the herds, while Heracles appears at the end of the *Philoctetes* in response to the ritual agreement Neoptolemus and Philoctetes have reached.

28. Jauss and Benzinger 1970, 7–37; Jauss 1982. On this phenomenon in Sophoclean ritual specifically, see Burkert 1985b, 8.

29. The *agon* entails a predictable exchange of speeches, the second almost always victorious, and the consequential determination of a winner and a loser with implications for the future treatment of both characters—and the communities of which they are considered members—on the basis of this determination.

30. Van Gennep 1909, 13–14, 27.

31. Van Gennep 1909, 15–16.

32. See, for example, Vidal-Naquet 1986a; Goldhill 1990; Winkler 1990; Padilla 1999; Dodd and Faraone 2003; Dowden 2011.

33. Leitaio 1999.

34. See Calame 1999; Versnel 1994, especially 64–67.

35. Turner 1969, 14, 94, 166; 1982, 24.

36. Turner 1969, 96–97.

37. Turner 1969, 203.

38. Turner 1982, 92.

39. On oath ritual, see “Oaths and Other Verbal Rituals” in chapter 2.

40. The canonical argument about the interpretation of this line is found in Avery 1968.

41. On suppliant ritual, see “Supplication” in chapter 2.

42. Halliwell 1986, 32–33.

43. Or, at least, the oldest source that is extant offers a continuous discussion of the issue, and is not of questionable authenticity. For fifth-century opinions on drama, we must be satisfied with metadramatic details in Aristophanes and others (see Valakas 2009). Other references to fifth-century dramatic theory—for example, the title preserved in the *Suda* of a treatise supposedly written by Sophocles, *On the Chorus*, and Plutarch’s sparse comments about Sophocles’ attempts to soften the harshness of Aeschylus (*Mor.* 79B)—are too vague to be of use.

44. Halliwell 1986, 33–34.

45. See *Poet.* 1453b3–7, 1462a14–18, as well as M. Heath 1987, 9–11.

46. Brooks 1984, 12. See also Bierl 2007, 13.

47. Indeed, Turner himself (1982, 11, 72) notes the way in which his theory of social drama corresponds with Aristotle’s theory of drama. He posits that theater emerges from the third step in the social drama (redress). See also Elsbee (1991, 156–57).

48. Elsbree 1991, 9–10.
49. Elsbree 1991, 1, 7–30.
50. Elsbree 1991, 38.
51. See Yatromanolakis and Roilos 2003, 2004.
52. Todorov 1981, 6–10.
53. These include a performative element, collectivity, traditionality, the prominence of spectacle, predictable order and the related ease of recognition of deviations from established patterns, solemnity, separation from the everyday or routine, and, above all, a symbolic communicative function (Yatromanolakis and Roilos 2003, 13–22).
54. Yatromanolakis and Roilos 2003, 27–34.
55. Henrichs 2004; see above. See also Easterling, Alexiou, and Sourvinou-Inwood in the same volume. For a more recent application of ritual poetics in Classical scholarship, see Kurke 2013.

Chapter 1. Normative Rituals and Ritual Mistakes in the *Antigone*, *Trachiniae*, and *Oedipus Tyrannus*

1. See Henderson 1991; Goldhill 1994; Dawson 1997; Sommerstein 1997, 1998; Revermann 2006.
2. Sourvinou-Inwood 2004, 161–63. For a more detailed and extensive illustration of the same source methodology, see Sourvinou-Inwood 2003.
3. See Zeitlin 1970, 359–60; Bierl 2007, 31.
4. On supplication, see below.
5. I cite only modern sources on Greek burial ritual, but each of these contains abundant references to the ancient evidence. Tragedy itself remains our most important source of contemporary literary evidence for fifth-century funerary practice; in addition to the Sophoclean examples I consider in this book, the most important plays are Aesch. *Cho.*, Eur. *El.*, *Alc.*, *IT*, *Hel.*, *Supp.*, and *Tro.* Beyond the fifth century, Dem. 43.62, Plut. *Sol.* 21, and Cic. *Leg.* 2.59–66 all offer corroborating evidence. On archaeological and artistic evidence for fifth-century funerary practice, see especially Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 91–142; Oakley 2004.
6. On the *prothesis*, see Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 143–44; Parker 1983, 35; Garland 1985, 23–26, 29–30; Johnston 1999, 40; McClure 1999, 42; Alexiou 2002, 5–6; Oakley 2004, 11–12, 76–87.
7. On the *ekphora* and the ensuing graveside rites, see Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 14–15; Parker 1983, 36; Garland 1985, 33–40; Johnston 1999, 40; McClure 1999, 42; Alexiou 2002, 6–8; Oakley 2004, 12–13.
8. See Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 147–50; Parker 1983, 38–39; Garland 1985, 104–19; Johnston 1999, 41–43, 54; Alexiou 2002, 7–9; Oakley 2004, 13.
9. Seaford 1987, 107; Rehm 1994, 29. Rehm (1994, 154n1) collects the standard secondary works on both marriage and funerary ritual in ancient Greece. As he remarks (1994, 11), “There is general agreement on the practice, if not the significance, of the two rituals.”

Rehm's brief survey of the visual evidence for marriages and funerals (1994, 30–42), with a focus on vases and grave stelae, is particularly helpful.

10. Seaford 1987, 106; Rehm 1994, 1–58.

11. Naiden 2013, 39–40. In addition to Naiden 2013, see Parker 2011, 124–70. Henrichs 2012 offers a helpful outline of the central issues pertaining to sacrifice in the context of Greek tragedy specifically, as does Jouanna 1992.

12. Casabona 1966 explores the vocabulary of ancient Greek sacrifice in great detail. On *θύω* and cognates, see pp. 69–154; on *σφάζω* and cognates, see pp. 155–96.

13. See Casabona 1966, 75–76; Burkert 1985a, 70–73.

14. Naiden 2006, 3–4, and, more broadly, chaps. 1–3. See also Dreher 2003 and Grethlein 2003.

15. Sommerstein and Torrance 2014, 1–2. Their database is available at www.nottingham.ac.uk/greatdatabase/brzoaths/public_html/database/index.php/php (accessed June 27, 2017). Fletcher (2011, 3), discussing oaths in tragedy, offers five criteria, a subset of which are present in every oath: (1) an invitation or offer to swear; (2) an invocation to the gods; (3) a verb of swearing; (4) an elaboration of what specifically is being promised; and (5) a conditional curse against any who might break the oath.

16. It is not impossible, though. One could analyze an oath as a tripartite process involving withdrawal from normal society, a period of transformation in which one's status as defined by obligation is altered, and a return to society with this new status. These three steps are not emphasized in the context of tragedy, however.

17. On prayers, see Pulleyn 1997; on curses, see Watson 1991. Pulleyn (1997, 4) in particular emphasizes the importance of reciprocity, or *charis*, in these types of verbal rituals. With regard to curses specifically, the likelihood of future divine intervention is typically determined not only by one's past good relationship with the gods but also by whether the one uttering the curse is deemed to have been wronged by enemies stronger than himself: Parker 1983, 197; Watson 1991, 25–27.

18. Cf. *Eum.* 282–83.

19. Parker 1983 *passim*.

20. As in the *bouphonia*, which ended only when the sacrificial knife was thrown into the sea. See Kamerbeek 1963, 136; Parker 1983, 226; and, especially, Guépin 1968, 39–40.

21. Parker 1983, 229; Krummen 1998, 304; Hesk 2003, 79.

22. On the consultation of the Delphic oracle and divination in ancient Greece more generally, see Nilsson 1951, chap. 5; Flacelière 1961; Fontenrose 1978; Bowden 2005; Eidinow 2007, chaps. 1–6; Stoneman 2011; Rosenberger 2013.

23. See Zeitlin 1970, 359; Seaford 1994, xv; Henrichs 2004; 2012, 194; Rehm 2012, 427.

24. See examples in Hüsken 2007b. See also Hüsken 2007a, 353: "Ritual is not so much a method to create a single outcome by one single performance, but a field where postulated effects, participant's intentions, and the social reality which emerges from a ritual process are negotiated."

25. Schieffelin 2007, 17–19.

26. See "Ritual Poetics" in the introduction.

27. The term “conflation” might imply a categorical or generic rigidity that I do not intend here. By using “conflation” I do not mean to suggest that rituals are normally completely distinct from one another. In other words, I do not suggest that the performance of two rituals at the same time is in itself a “mistake,” or that nominally distinct ritual categories never share any features: They clearly do, as the discussion of marriage and funeral ritual in this chapter demonstrates. My use of “conflation” rejects any rigid categorization of rituals and embraces a more fluid and flexible model, one that Yatromanolakis describes with the term “interdiscursivity.” On interdiscursivity and its application in the ritual poetic analysis of Greek literature, see Yatromanolakis 2004 and especially 2008; Yatromanolakis and Roilos 2003, 37–40.

28. As canonically defined by Knox (1966, 1–62).

29. See Rehm 1994, 180n1, for extensive bibliography on marriage and death in the *Antigone*. See also Johnston 2006.

30. Seaford (1987, 113) even suggests that Antigone goes to her death dressed as a bride and later uses her veil as a noose. Historically, dressing the corpse in wedding clothes was common practice when a young woman died before she was married (Rehm 1994, 64).

31. Ormand 1999, 92–96.

32. As Loraux (1991, 31) observes, Antigone’s abnormal defiance is reflected in the fact that she is the only virgin in extant tragedy who kills herself rather than being killed by somebody else.

33. Loraux 1991, 7–30.

34. See Segal 1975, 35; 1981, 67; Easterling 1981, 59; Seaford 1994, 391.

35. The same is true of Ajax’s suicide, as I discuss in chapter 2.

36. Cf. Calame (1998a, 212), who sees this vocabulary, along with references to “the cut of the groan-causing iron” (στονόνεντος / ἐν τομῇ σιδήρου, 886–87) and the use of a “double-edged sword” (ἀμφιπλήρη φασγάνω, 930), as evidence that Deianeira’s suicide is also meant to be compared directly to the bull sacrifice carried out by Heracles, mentioned at lines 237, 754, and 993.

37. On Heracles as sacrificial victim in the final scene of *Trachiniae*, an inversion of his role at Cenaean, see Jouanna 1992, 428–29; Calame 1998a, 197, 211–15; Pozzi 1999, 33. Segal (1995, 55–58) stresses the connection between the earlier sacrifice at Cenaean and the way in which the *exodos* anticipates Heracles’ death by pyre on Mount Oeta as a corresponding act of sacrifice.

38. On the way in which the *Trachiniae* anticipates Heracles’ apotheosis, see below, especially n. 66.

39. Cf. Stroup (2004, 142), who says that “ritual is never ‘just once.’ It is, almost by definition . . . ‘again and again and again.’”

40. Rehm 1994, 69; Segal 1995, 123. After Antigone’s death, the conflation of marriage and death recurs in the eroticized description of Haemon’s suicide upon discovering her corpse, in which the messenger describes Haemon as “a poor wretch, having achieved marital consummation in the house of Hades” (τῷ νυμφικῷ / τέλει λαχὼν δεῖλαιος ἐν γ’ Ἀΐδου δόμοις, 1240–41; Rehm 2012, 418). This, in turn, leads to another iteration of the conflation of

marriage and death motif as Eurydice laments not just for Haemon but also for the empty marriage bed (κενὸν λέχος, 1303) of her other dead son, Megareus, prompting her, like Antigone, to choose Hades rather than marriage to a living man.

41. A helpful exposition of the issues surrounding the burial motif in the *Antigone* can be found in Margon 1969 and 1972. For details on Greek burial customs, see above.

42. Hame 2008, 7–8.

43. For a range of opinions on the double-burial motif in the *Antigone* (addressing who performs each of the two burials and why), see Rouse 1911; Messemier 1942; Rose 1952; Bradshaw 1962; Hulton 1963; Rockwell 1964; Margon 1969, 1972; McCall 1972; Segal 1981, 157–61, 173–76; Held 1983; Morwood 1993; Hame 2008.

44. Seaford 1990, 76.

45. A legitimate and definitive burial, which accomplishes what Antigone’s ministrations could not: Hame 2008, 11.

46. Segal 1996, 158–59.

47. Zeitlin 1990, 152–53.

48. What little is preserved about this aftermath in the mythical tradition supports a bleak reading. A variant tradition, found in Book 12 of Statius’ *Thebaid*, tells us that Creon was killed in battle by Theseus for his refusal to allow the burial of the Seven. And a fragment of Mimnernus (fr. 21, West) describes the death of Ismene at the hands of the Argive Tydeus and at the bidding of Athena in retribution for her illicit affair with Theoclymenus.

49. On Oedipus’ pollution as an individual in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, see Parker 1983, 316–20. On the plague in Thebes more broadly, see Parker 1983, 129–30, 141, 257, 278.

50. On Oedipus’ character and his identity as a tragic hero, see Weil 1968; on Greek ideas about fate and the divine, see Kane 1975, 200; Carey 1986, 179; Bushnell 1988, 81; Burkert 1991, 23.

51. Kane 1975, 201.

52. Weil 1968, 337.

53. See Kane 1975, 196–97, on Oedipus’ excessive reliance on *opsis* in this decision.

54. Weil 1968, 337.

55. Minadeo 1990a, 253.

56. Minadeo 1990a, 254.

57. See, for example, Dyson 1973; Davies 1982; Gellie 1986; Pucci 1991; Hester 1992; Foley 1993; Kitzinger 1993; Budelmann 2006; Burian 2009; Finglass 2009; Kovacs 2009; Sommerstein 2011.

58. See, for example, Kitzinger 1993, 539–40; Budelmann 2006, 53–57.

59. Bushnell 1988, 84; Roberts 1988, 184.

60. Segal 1993, 87.

61. See Hüskens 2007a, 353, on the idea that the same ritual can be considered both a failure and a success depending on the criteria used to determine efficacy.

62. In this example, of course, the wedding must take place in a jurisdiction where polygamy is not legal.

63. On ancient Greek funerary ritual, see above.

64. See Segal 1981, 74.

65. Holt 1989, 76.

66. Segal 1981, 99–100, and Parker 1999, 24, support my proposal that the *Trachiniae* anticipates Heracles' apotheosis; Easterling 1981, 65–68, and Calame 1998a, 202, are more circumspect. The debate revolves around the question of whether the pyre and the apotheosis had been linked in the mythical tradition at the time of the performance of the *Trachiniae*, which is not securely dated. Most scholars argue that this was the case, and my ritual analysis supports that position. See Roberts 1988, 183; Holt 1989; Hahnnemann 1999; Heiden 2012, 141–42.

67. Segal 1986, 60.

68. See, for example, Segal 1981, 102–3, which describes how, as Heracles attempts to found a new *oikos* through the union of Hyllus and Iole, “the new house is too closely linked to the destruction of the old.”

69. On supplication, see above.

70. Oedipus' problematic identity yields a ritual that, while not technically incorrect, still has many odd features. Normally, in times of public crisis, the city would collectively supplicate the gods in order that they might have help from powerful men; here, instead, they supplicate the mortal Oedipus in order that they might have help from the Delphic oracle (Zeitlin 1970, 132–33). The fact that Oedipus, a secular ruler, is supplicated by a sacred priest reflects a similar inversion (Whitman 1951, 125–26). The scene is also unusual in the way it displays the abasement of the citizens of Thebes at the altars, normally places of supplication more appropriate to outlaws, foreigners, or those persecuted by enemies (Zeitlin 1970, 134).

71. On curses, see above.

72. See Segal 1981, 234–36; Kitzinger 1993, 549; Beer 2012, 106–7; Rehm 2012, 422–23.

73. Kitzinger 1993, 539–40.

Chapter 2. Ritual Conflation in the *Ajax*

1. Bergson (1986, 49), for example, suggests dividing the play into three sections based on the principle that their content could be dramatized as three plays in a connected trilogy: 1–429, 430–1039, and 1040–1420.

2. As many commentators do; for bibliography on this issue, see especially Hubbard 2003, 158–59nn1–9.

3. Van Gennep 1909, 13–14, 27; and see the introduction to this book.

4. On sacrifice, see “Sacrifice” in chapter 1.

5. On σφάζω and its connotations, see Casabona 1966, 155–95; Henrichs 2000, 180–82; 2012, 186. On the sacrificial overtones of this language in the *Ajax* specifically, see Casabona 1966, 176–77.

6. De Jong (2006, 87–88) suggests that Tecmessa emphasizes the sacrificial nature of Ajax's actions much more than the other characters because ritual is her way of rationalizing his otherwise inexplicable actions.

7. Garvie 1998, 142.
8. Casabona 1966, 311.
9. Kadletz 1981. Jebb (1896), Kamerbeek (1963), Garvie (1998), and Finglass (2011) raise *ad loc.* the possibility that Ajax might be portrayed as a priest, though they are all somewhat circumspect.
10. See Parker 2011, 124–70.
11. Many have noted the extremity of Ajax’s isolation. See Reinhardt 1979, 19; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 24; Segal 1981, 114; Padel 1995, 43–44, 74, 99–100; Garvie 1998, 167.
12. Made explicit later in the play (756–77).
13. Segal (1981, 138) describes the slaughter as a “violation of the ritual order as well as the social order.” See also Henrichs 2000, 181; 2012, 189; Finglass 2011, 207–8, 211–12.
14. See Naiden 2013.
15. On funeral ritual, see “Funerary Rites” in chapter 1.
16. In his conversation with Tecmessa and the Chorus, Ajax exclaims, “Alas! Whoever would have supposed that my given name would match my misfortunes?” (αἰαῖ· τίς ἄν ποτ’ ᾤεθ’ ὄδ’ ἐπώνυμον / τοῦμὸν ξυνοῖσεν ὄνομα τοῖς ἔμοις κακοῖς; 430–31).
17. Dué 2012, 239.
18. See LSJ κείμαι I.4, I.5; προκεῖμαι I.2. Jebb (1896, 161), Garvie (1998, 164), and Finglass (2011, 263) all comment on the funereal resonance of these verbs. On *prothesis*, see “Funerary Ritual” in chapter 1.
19. This includes repetition of this verb beyond part I of the play. As we will see, these same verbs are used later to describe Ajax once he is actually dead (899, 989, 1306, 1309).
20. Burian 2012, 75.
21. Rehm 1994, 24; Alexiou 2002, 6; Oakley 2004, 11–12, 76–87.
22. Gardiner 1987, 66; Burton 1980, 24–25.
23. LSJ I.2.
24. Stanford 1981, 102; Garvie 1998, 154.
25. Guépin (1968, 24–25) notes that the motif of a hero described as a maddened bull ready for slaughter is common in the depiction of fallen heroes.
26. Athena at lines 65 (αἰκίζεταί) and 111 (μὴ . . . αἰκίσῃ), and Tecmessa at 300 (ἡκίσεθ).
27. Rehm 1994, 22; Garvie 1998, 154; Alexiou 2002, 6.
28. Or even, as Stanford (1981, 103) suggests, that of Penelope for her absent husband in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*.
29. See Goldhill 2012, 91–96; Nooter 2012, 39–40.
30. On purification ritual, see “Purification” in chapter 1.
31. Goward 1999, 90–91.
32. Burkert 1985a, 75–82.
33. Krummen 1998, 308.
34. For example, see Jebb 1896, Kamerbeek 1963, Stanford 1981, Garvie 1998, and Finglass 2011 *ad loc.* See also Knox 1966, 11; Sicherl 1977, 78; Krummen 1998, 307.

35. See Errandonea 1968 and, more recently, Gasti 1997 for a concise overview of scholarly approaches to this contentious issue.

36. This is incredibly rare, occurring elsewhere only in *Eumenides*, *Alcestis*, and *Helen*: Lattimore 1958, 69n21.

37. Finglass 2011, 75.

38. I borrow “subjunctive” from Turner (1969, 127; 1982, 82) and “time out of time” from Rappaport (1999, 187–88, 201).

39. Parker 1983, 10. Krummen (1998, 302–3) finds here a reference to the first steps in the purification rituals prescribed for both murder and illness.

40. Stanford 1981, 166; Henrichs 2012, 192.

41. Sicherl (1977, 96), Segal (1981, 139), and Finglass (2011, 333) all see the burial of the sword as a perverted element in this sacrificial ritual, one that Segal suggests “grimly parodies” proper ritual action.

42. The word *αὐτοσφαγής* appears in lines 839–42, which most commentators, including one of the scholiasts, identify as an interpolation (Page 1934, 117). See also Jebb 1896, Kamerbeek 1963, Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990 and 1997, Garvie 1998, and Finglass 2011 *ad loc.* The principal arguments against these lines as laid out by Stanford (1981, 170) are as follows: (1) that *φιλίστων* (842) is a late superlative form that could not have been used by Sophocles as early as the fifth century; (2) that the appearance of two forms of *αὐτοσφαγής* with two different meanings (slain by one’s own hand vs. slain by a kinsman) in the same line (841) is unlikely; (3) that Agamemnon is nowhere in mythological tradition killed by his descendants, and Sophocles would not make a character utter a curse that the audience knew would not be fulfilled; and (4) that if 841–42 are suspect for these reasons, 839–40 must be excised too because the transition from the end of 840 to the beginning of 843 is too abrupt. Despite these concerns, Stanford (1981, 170) argues in support of these lines. He notes that the appearance of the irregular comparative *φιλίων* in Homer makes the corresponding superlative *φιλίστων* at least possible in Sophocles, citing the argument of Delcourt (1939, 159n2) that the exceptional form supports the authenticity of the verse because an interpolator would have chosen more banal language. On the juxtaposition of two forms of *αὐτοσφαγής* Stanford says: “Ajax’s curse needs some amplitude, and I doubt whether an interpolator would use the daring word-play on the two meanings of *αὐτοσφαγής*, a paronomasia which as often elsewhere in Greek tragedy . . . gives added solemnity and force to the malediction.” As for the question of the content of Ajax’s curse vis-à-vis the fate of Agamemnon, Stanford quite rightly points out that this is a curse, not a prediction, and the subsequent history of the House of Atreus is irrelevant. I would add that the same commentators who excise this line as an inaccurate prediction have no trouble with 1389–92, where Teucer asks the Erinyes to destroy *both* Agamemnon and Menelaus cruelly, even though the mythical tradition describes Menelaus living out his life in peace and security with Helen at Sparta. In sum, there is nothing that strongly compels us to reject these lines over the authority of the manuscript tradition, and so here and elsewhere in this chapter I draw on 839–42 in support of my arguments. That being said, my argument does not stand or fall with the authenticity of these lines. Even if the word *αὐτοσφαγής* does not appear in this scene, the abundance

of sacrificial vocabulary elsewhere in the play confirms the sacrificial character of Ajax's death.

43. Jouanna 1992, 421–22.

44. Seaford 1994, 392–93.

45. Cohen 1978, 28–29.

46. Knox 1961, 20.

47. Zeitlin 1970, 97–98, 285, 357; Sicherl 1977, 97; Segal 1981, 139; Garvie 1998, 194; Finglass 2011, 380.

48. But see n. 42.

49. See Naiden 2015, which uses this passage in the *Ajax* as part of a larger argument that the Athenians generally attributed the crime of suicide to the weapon rather than to the person killing himself.

50. Zeitlin (1970, 97–98) too notices this tension in Tecmessa's language.

51. This first plural could be a poetic plural ("I am prepared") but is more effective if translated as referring to both Ajax and his weapon ("we are prepared"): Stanford 1981, 168.

52. Segal (1981, 139) suggests that the suicide "answers" the perverted sacrifice of the herds; Zeitlin (1970, 208) describes "the symmetry of the same metaphorical language" used in both scenes.

53. Garvie (1998, 206) identifies a similar (though weaker) connection between Parts I and II through repetition of the verb *πηδάω*. In the prologue Odysseus describes a scout who sees Ajax "bounding across the plain, with newly dripping sword" (*πηδῶντα πεδία σὺν νεορπάντῳ ξίφει*, 30), while in his suicide speech Ajax asks Hermes for a quick death by means of a single "swift leap" (*ταχέϊ πηδήματι*, 833) onto his sword.

54. Even if it is unlikely that the motif of a backward rite of passage is discernible to the audience at this point, we may note with the benefit of hindsight that Sophocles has staged the liminal moment of ritual transition at the same moment as Ajax's *peripeteia* in the broader sweep of the play's narrative. For a brief moment, ritual and narrative arc coincide in a play in which they are otherwise at odds, highlighting their progress in opposite directions. This appears to be an elegant dramaturgical choice on Sophocles' part.

55. Burian 2012, 76–77.

56. See Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 144; Stanford 1981, 179; Garland 1985, 24.

57. Alexiou 2002, 6.

58. Pace Taplin 1978, 87.

59. On the symbolism of the hair see Jebb 1896, 176–77; Henrichs 1993, 167; Garvie 1998, 153.

60. Burian 1972, 152–54; Taplin 1978, 109; Henrichs 1993, 166–67; Hesk 2003, 118–20; Currie 2012, 335. Hesk points out that the protector/protected paradox reflects other paradoxes embodied by Ajax in this scene. He is both suicide and savior, criminal and victim, outcast and cult hero. This ambiguous identity resonates with the one Sophocles assigns to Oedipus in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. See chapter 5.

61. This reading, guided by the principles of ritual poetics, in no way undermines other interpretations of the scene that focus on its reverential tranquility (Poe 1987, 15;

Hesk 2003, 118), its pathos (Heath 1987, 200; Garvie 1998, 155), and its implications for Ajax's future status as cult hero (Burian 1972, 155; Sicheil 1977, 97; March 1991–93, 31; Easterling 1993, 11, 16; Henrichs 1993, 171–77; Garvie 1998, 155; Krummen 1998, 314).

62. Naiden 2006, 335.

63. At 1177 Ajax is ἄθαπτος, and at 1184 Teucer proposes to tend to the grave (τάφου μεληθείς). In part III θάπτω and its compounds also appear at 1089, 1090, 1131, 1141, 1327, and 1364, while τάφος occurs at 1040, 1063, 1167, and 1394.

64. On curses in ancient Greece and Rome, see Watson 1991, 1–53.

65. Watson 1991, 2–3, 25–27.

66. Stanford 1981, 232; Garvie 1998, 249.

67. Heath and O'Kell 2007, 375–80. See also Jebb 1896, xli–xlvii.

68. In spite of Zeitlin's (1970, 100) rather optimistic assertion that the funerary λουτρά are the first and only "normal" rites in the play.

69. See Christodoulou 1977, 227, on line 1123.

70. A thorough timeline of the bibliography on structural analysis of the *Ajax* is found in Hubbard 2003, 158–59nn1–9. In defense of analyzing the play as having two balanced, parallel halves, see especially Wigodsky 1962; Grütter 1971; Tyrrell 1985; Heath 1987, 195–97, 204–8; Hubbard 2003; Finglass 2011, 51–57; 2012, 62–72.

71. See especially Segal 1996; also Zeitlin 1970, 97–99; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 72; Segal 1981, 142; Tyrrell 1985, 171–75; Poe 1987, 15–17; Easterling 1993, 15–17; Garvie 1998, 244, 249; Henrichs 2004, 194, 197–98; Rehm 2012, 415, 425. While many of these authors (Segal included) also find anticlusal elements in the conclusion of the *Ajax*, they argue that the references to burial provide closure.

72. Segal 1996, 158.

73. Segal 1996, 157–60.

74. See Burian 1972; Henrichs 1993.

75. Henrichs 1993, 175. By contrast, Roberts (1988, 188–94) argues that references to the future such as we find at the end of the *Ajax* allow the audience some measure of doubt about the traditional future of the mythical characters on the stage, encouraging the audience to postpone judgment rather than take the sequel for granted.

76. Stanford 1981, 74.

77. Finglass (2011, 375) notes the strong clausal effect of both the Chorus's departure and Ajax's death.

Chapter 3. Ritual Repetition in the *Electra*

1. See "Sophoclean Rituals and Ritual Theory" in the introduction.
2. On funeral ritual, see "Funerary Ritual" in chapter 1.
3. This occurs frequently in Sophocles, characterizing the deaths of Deianeira, Heracles, Ajax, and Oedipus.
4. Zeitlin 1965, 1966. The only exception to this is Orestes' death in a chariot accident, which is corrupt not because of the way in which it is performed but because the story is fabricated. On Orestes' death, see below.

5. Zeitlin 1965, 489.
6. Segal 1981, 270–71. See below, including n. 18, on the familiarity of Sophocles' audience with the plays of Aeschylus.
7. Usually marked linguistically with *παλαιός* or *παλαί* (Segal 1966, 508).
8. Seaford 1985, 320.
9. Goldhill 2012, 74.
10. This reading answers Dunn's concern that the *Electra* is a problem play "because it lacks the normal machinery to drive its plot forward" (2012, 104). Dunn proposes that Electra's emotions are the main driving force behind the plot (2012, 106–7); I argue that ritual is the central motivating force.
11. Pace Sheppard (1927a, 3–4), who argues that Orestes has asked the wrong question of Apollo—*how* and not *whether* he should kill his mother—and thus does not actually have the god's support. This argument has met with appropriate skepticism, both explicitly (Bowra 1944, 215–16; Alexanderson 1966, 81; Gellie 1972, 107; Stevens 1978, 113; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 236; Szlezák 1981, 12; March 2001, 137–38) and implicitly (Erbse 1978, 291–93; Bowman 1997, 144–45; Flashar 2000, 127; Finglass 2007, 511).
12. Van Nortwick (2015, 130n61) gives the recent bibliography on this issue. See my discussion below.
13. Kaibel 1911, 153; Hogan 1991, 288.
14. Zeitlin 1965, 489.
15. For a concise summary of the contrasting interpretations that Sophocles' account leaves open, see Kaibel 1911, 16–19.
16. An argument defended by many modern critics: Linforth 1973, 98; MacLeod 2001, 84–85; Finglass 2007, 267.
17. There is no reason to think that human sacrifice was ever practiced in historical ancient Greece: Henrichs 1981, 197; Hughes 1991, 137.
18. Evidence for revivals of Aeschylus is found at *Vit. Aesch.* 12, Philostr. *VA* 6.11, and *Ar. Ach.* 9–12. See Pickard-Cambridge 1953, 87n1.
19. Kaibel 1911, 156–57. Segal (1981, 271) emphasizes Sophocles' use of the word *ἐκθύειν* in evoking the corrupt sacrifice that Aeschylus describes.
20. Cf. *Electra* at line 221: "in terrible circumstances I was compelled to do terrible things" (*ἐν δεινοῖς δεῖν' ἠναγκάσθη*).
21. His death is most frequently called *φόνος* (11, 14, 116, 447, 779, 953, 955, 980, 1352), and Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are called *φονεῖς* or *φονεῶντες* (34, 263, 358, 816, 953, 1190, 1352). Explicit references to his death as sacrifice (*θύω*, *σφάζω*, etc.) are absent.
22. The audience was possibly made more receptive to a Homeric reference by the mention of another daughter of Agamemnon, Iphianassa, shortly before in line 158. Iphianassa is named as a daughter of Agamemnon at *Il.* 9.145 (= 9.287). See Finglass 2007, 151.
23. Homer gives this detail twice, at *Od.* 4.534–35 and 11.410–11: *κατέπεφνε / . . . ὥς τις τε κατέκτανε βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτῃ*. Aeschylus, too, appears to allude to this Homeric tradition when his Cassandra cries, "Keep the cow from the bull!" (*ἄπεχε τῆς βοῦς / τὸν ταῦρον*, *Ag.* 1125–26).
24. Zeitlin 1970, 277.

25. Lloyd 2005, 44. See above.
26. Segal 1966, 485.
27. Seaford 1985, 315–16.
28. Jebb 1870, 46–47; Zeitlin 1970, 104; Kells 1973, 115.
29. Hogan 1991, 286. Cf. *Eum.* 282–83.
30. Finglass 2007, 225. Finglass, by focusing on the corpse and not the living Agamemnon, makes better sense of the bathing metaphor than Mauduit. Mauduit argues that by making Agamemnon's body as dirty as possible, Clytemnestra reverses the bath that traditionally accompanied his death (1994, 144–45). This explanation is a poor fit for Sophocles' *Electra*, in which Agamemnon dies at the table, by contrast with Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, in which he dies while bathing.
31. Finglass 2007, 224–25.
32. Méautis 1957, 235; Segal 1981, 274; Szlezák 1981, 16; Hogan 1991, 286; Johnston 1999, 156–59.
33. Ringer 1998, 152. On joy (and its inappropriateness) in the *Electra*, see Wright 2005. On this particular ritual, see Wright 2005, 182.
34. Segal 1981, 271.
35. Kamerbeek 1974, 52. Cf. Henrichs 2012, 185.
36. Seaford 1985, 317.
37. Finglass 2007, 211–12. “Burnt offerings” is Finglass' preferred translation, while Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990, 49) prefer to translate “vessels.” Kaibel's (1911, 133) interpretation of this word is much broader, including any kind of sacrificial offerings, not just burnt ones.
38. Zeitlin 1970, 174.
39. See above, especially n. 18.
40. Kitzynger 1991, 311.
41. Kaibel 1911, 139. Purification typically involved disposing of the materials involved in the ritual by throwing them into the sea, burying them, or casting them aside at a crossroads (see “Purification” in chapter 1).
42. Zeitlin 1970, 172; Kitzynger 1991, 310–11; MacLeod 2001, 74–76.
43. Segal 1981, 277.
44. Jebb 1870, 90; Kells 1973, 160; Finglass 2007, 108.
45. MacLeod (2001, 108–10) and Lloyd (2005, 66–70) both offer summaries of the prevailing arguments.
46. Sheppard 1927a, 7; Corrigan 1955, 48; Finglass 2007, 302.
47. Kells 1973, 149; March 2001, 189.
48. Finglass 2007, 462.
49. Segal 1981, 273.
50. Woodard (1965, 221) observes, “Orestes' fictitious death inflicts a dramatically literal death on Electra.” Segal (1981, 274) echoes this sentiment.
51. See Kells 1973, 219; Segal 1981, 288; 1985, 19; March 1996, 71.
52. For example, Jebb 1870, 95; Johansen 1964, 24–25; Alexanderson 1966, 88; Gellie

1972, 119; Linforth 1973, 125; Batchelder 1995, 132; March 1996, 70–72; 2001, 18, 219; Finglass 2007, 510.

53. For example, Johansen 1964, 26; Segal 1966, 501; Gellie 1972, 126; Kells 1973, 220; Linforth 1973, 109; Seale 1982, 74–75; Kitzinger 1991, 326; Hartigan 1996, 85–86, 90; Bowman 1997, 148; MacLeod 2001, 153; March 2001, 221; Wheeler 2003, 379; Nooter 2012, 101–23, especially 121.

54. Seaford 1985, 321. See also Seaford 1994, 376; Burnett 1998, 131; Ringer 1998, 152; March 2001, 222.

55. Zeitlin 1970, 356.

56. See Segal 1966, 526.

57. Kaibel 1911, 288; Bowra 1944, 252; Adams 1957, 77–78; Alexanderson 1966, 92; Minadeo 1967, 135–37; Hogan 1991, 307–8; Flashar 2000, 134; Finglass 2007, 513, 516; Dunn 2012, 103.

58. Johansen 1964, 26.

59. Cf. also Finglass' (2007, 184) observation that the audience may very well be invited to compare the monthly feasts that Clytemnestra has instituted to commemorate and celebrate Agamemnon's death with the sacrificial feasts at which the sisters will be honored as tyrant-slayers, which Electra conjures up in an effort to tempt Chrysothemis to join her murder plot at 982–83. If this came to pass, the sisters would take on a ritual role formerly occupied by their mother, perpetuating a genealogically determined pattern.

60. Woodard 1964, 196; Seaford 1994, 376; Zeitlin 2012, 367–69.

61. Cf. Clytemnestra's call for silence for her own act of sacrifice at 630–31.

62. Flashar (2000, 135) and March (2001, 229) both note the significance of this repetition.

63. Kells 1973, 231.

64. Segal 1981, 272.

65. Jebb 1870, 157.

66. Kaibel 1911, 298–99; Adams 1957, 59; Méautis 1957, 249; Gellie 1972, 128; Kamerbeek 1974, 191; Szlezák 1981, 3; Seaford 1985, 321. A Homeric intertext is explicitly rejected by Segal 1966, 521; Erbse 1978, 297; Burnett 1998, 136; MacLeod 2001, 177.

67. Kitzinger 1991, 326; Burnett 1998, 135–36; Finglass 2007, 525.

68. Bowra 1944, 255; Segal 1966, 520–21; Burnett 1998, 139; Ringer 1998, 209.

69. Adams 1957, 66; Kamerbeek 1974, 31; MacLeod 2001, 39; March 2001, 143; Lloyd 2005, 38; Dunn 2012, 98.

70. Nooter 2011, 402; 2012, 105.

71. Van Nortwick (2015, 17) connects Electra's interruption of Orestes' plotting with the inauguration of the sense of inescapable repetition that defines the play's plot. He writes, "Time, which appeared in the prologue as *kairos*, now slows, settling into endless repetitive cycles: night, day, winter, summer, always circling back to that terrible day when Agamemnon was murdered, the event that ended Electra's happiness and began her imprisonment."

72. Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 146–47; Seaford 1985, 320; Holst-Warhaft 1992, 3.

73. Seaford 1994, 376; Finglass 2007, 164.
74. Seaford 1985, 318.
75. Dunn offers an eloquent discussion of the unchanging permanence of Electra's liminal existence in this play, occupying what he calls "negative space" (2009b, 346).
76. Loraux 2002, 31–32. The emendation from αἰᾶ to αἰεῖ in line 152 (the former is better attested in the manuscripts) is supported by Jebb 1870, Kells 1973, March 2001, and Finglass 2007; the general consensus is that the idea of perpetuity is very important in this mythical exemplum and the repetition of αἰεῖ (αἰέν is found at 148) reinforces it. Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990 are ambivalent about line 152 and simply suggest that "if one wishes to read αἰεῖ in 152 there is no need to assume that it has got there by transposition."
77. Whitman 1951, 165; Arnould 1990, 248; Seaford 1994, 175; March 2001, 150; Finglass 2007, 148; Nooter 2011, 405; Dué 2012, 243.
78. Cairns 1991. This is only one of many doublings of character and action in the *Electra*, which reinforce the sense that the House of Atreus is governed by a dynamic of repetition. See Finglass 2007, 370–73, 437–38; Jouanna 2007, 322–33; Torrance 2014, 87–88; van Nortwick 2015, 27–29.
79. See Batchelder 1995, 50; Kells 1973, 88; Seaford 1985, 320; Ringer 1998, 144; Wright 2005, 182; Goldhill 2012, 76.
80. Segal 1981, 272.
81. This must have been especially true for the spectators of Sophocles' original audience. As Koonce (1962, 131) suggests, "The usefulness of lament for the dramatist lies . . . in the extent to which it reflects what was for his audience a living social institution, and if the laments of tragedy were more attractive to the Athenian than they are to us, the reason is perhaps not that he had the advantage of seeing the dance and the spectacle (he had that advantage over us in all tragic lyrics), but that he had an awareness, based on his familiarity with lament as a traditionally accepted means of dealing with death, of any peculiarities or departures from convention the dramatist might portray in his representation of the custom."
82. Mitchell-Boyask (2012, 326) explores the medical metaphor in this play, noting, "Pain spreads among these characters on contact, almost like a disease."
83. Seale 1982, 62. Nooter (2012, 101–23) describes how Electra uses the poetic authority of her lyrical lament to control the behavior and experiences of other characters.
84. Burton 1980, 188–90.
85. Burton 1980, 192–96.
86. Gardiner 1987, 144–45. In the *parodos*, Gardiner shows, the Chorus yields to Electra's arguments three times.
87. Goldhill 2012, 119. See also Gardiner 1987, 153; Foley 2001, 157; Finglass 2007, 356; Dué 2012, 243.
88. Nooter 2011, 410.
89. See especially Woodard 1964, 1965.
90. Nooter 2011, 400–401; 2012, 116–17.
91. Van Nortwick 2015, 32.

92. Nooter 2011, 413.
93. Adams 1957, 62.
94. Loraux 2002, 38.
95. Finglass 2007, 489.
96. Ringer 1998, 185.
97. Chrysothemis also expresses joy through tears when she discovers Orestes' offerings on Agamemnon's grave (905–6). In the House of Atreus, joy is often expressed though weeping, which makes it, in many ways, indistinguishable from lament. See Arnould 1990.
98. Flashar 2000, 136; Lloyd 2005, 114.
99. Ringer 1998, 211.
100. Jebb 1870, xii; Case 1902; Bowra 1944, 256–58; Whitman 1951, 150–70; Corrigan 1955, 65–66; Alexanderson 1966, 97–98; Linforth 1973, 122; Erbse 1978, 297–300; Stevens 1978; Burton 1980, 220; Batchelder 1995, 43; March 1996, 81; 2001, 231; Lefèvre 2001, 179–83; Jouanna 2007, 439–40; Kaufman 2012.
101. Sheppard 1918, 1927a, 1927b; Kells 1973, 6–12; 1986; Cairns 1991; Wright 2005; Bocksberger 2012; van Nortwick 2015, 36–37.
102. Minadeo 1967, 133; Kamerbeek 1974, 20; Schein 1982, 79–80; Burnett 1998, 139–40; Ringer 1998, 128, 185; Foley 2001, 170; Dunn 2009a, 354–55; E. R. Wilson 2012, 544–62.
103. Kaibel 1911, 301–3; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 226–27; 1983, 214–15; Szlezák 1981, 2; Kitzinger 1991, 327; Lloyd 2005, 115; Finglass 2007, 526–28.
104. Kirkwood 1942, 93; Roberts 1988, 191; Segal 1996, 158; Bowman 1997, 148–49; Flashar 2000, 138; MacLeod 2001, 184; Dunn 2009a, 354.
105. Johansen 1964, 32; Woodard 1965, 227; Kells 1973, 231; 1986, 153–55; Reinhardt 1979, 161; Ormand 1999, 77–78; Loraux 2002, 22; Garvie 2012, 288; Goldhill 2012, 20.
106. See above.
107. Blundell 1989, 182; Kitzinger 1991, 327; van Nortwick 2015, 36.
108. See Minadeo (1967, 124), who argues that even when Electra is praying to Apollo, the hostile tone of her words allows for a continuing opposition between them. He asserts that “no tension is more intrinsically grounded in the plot than this persistent dissociation of god and heroine.”
109. I strongly disagree with the argument presented in Bollack 2012 that Electra's central role is usurped by Apollo at the end of the play and that, after the recognition scene, “elle quitte son personnage d'Électre, le rôle qu'elle a tenu durant toute la pièce” (2012, 273).
110. Kirkwood 1958, 273; Reinhardt 1979, 135–37; Burnett 1998, 127.
111. Goldhill 2009, 41.
112. Linforth 1973, 122. See also van Nortwick (2015, 10), who argues that Electra's invocation of the Erinyes at the beginning of the play (112) evokes this aspect of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.
113. Roberts 1988, 192.
114. Holst-Warhaft 1992, 118–19; Alexiou 2002, 22–23.
115. See especially Alexiou 2002, 36–51; Holst-Warhaft 1992, 75–126.

Chapter 4. Ritual Status in the *Philoctetes*

1. See Rehm 2002, 141: “Lemnos allows the two soldiers ‘time-out’ from normal constraints.”
2. Locations similarly distant from Greece and/or Greek society are featured in *Persians*, *Helen*, and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, but the same degree of social isolation is found only in *Prometheus Bound*.
3. As Dio Chrysostom’s summary of all three Philoctetes plays tells us, both Euripides and Aeschylus staged choruses of Lemnians (*Or.* 52.7). Sophocles, by contrast, assigns Neoptolemus’ sailors this role, intensifying the isolated quality of Lemnos by making Philoctetes its sole inhabitant. See Gibert 1995, 161; Flashar 2000, 148; Rehm 2002, 138; Schein 2013, 7–8; van Nortwick 2015, 47–48.
4. Philoctetes articulates this when Neoptolemus refuses to return Heracles’ bow, his sole means of obtaining food and fending off predators: “But I myself, in my wretched state, will provide a feast for those with whom I used to nourish myself, and those whom I used to hunt will now hunt me” (ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς τάλας / θανὼν παρέξω δαῖτ’ ἅπ’ ὧν ἐφερβόμην, / καὶ μ’ οὖς ἐθήρων πρόσθε θηράσουσι νῦν, 956–58). Cf. Schein (2001, 39), who describes the “kill-or-be-killed, animal ecology of the island.”
5. Segal 1981, 292, 354.
6. Cf. Philoctetes’ words at 1019–22: “May you perish! But I often prayed for this, and the gods accomplish nothing sweet for me. For you live with impunity, while I am pained, because I live wretchedly with many misfortunes” (ὄλοιο· καίτοι πολλάκις τόδ’ ἠϋξάμην. / ἀλλ’ οὐ γὰρ οὐδέν θεοὶ νέμουσιν ἡδὺ μοι, / σὺ μὲν γέγηθας ζῶν, ἐγὼ δ’ ἀλγύνομαι / τοῦτ’ αὐθ’, ὅτι ζῶ σὺν κακοῖς πολλοῖς τάλας). Watson (1991, 25–27) discusses the widespread Greek belief that the curses of those in positions of power and authority were much more likely to succeed than those of the socially marginalized. Philoctetes’ despairing words may reflect this belief.
7. Strauss 1993, 89. See also Marinatos 2003, 130–31.
8. For evidence, bibliography, and discussion on ephebes and the *ephebeia*, see especially Ober 1985, 90–91; Vidal-Naquet 1986a, 106–28; Whitehead 1986, 97–104; Winkler 1990, 24–37; Lambert 1993, 148–51; Strauss 1993, 95–96; Hansen 1999, 89–90, 96–97; J. Roisman 2005, 11–12, especially 12n5. Reinmuth 1971 collects the fourth-century inscriptions relating to ephebes, which are largely dedications declaring honors for the ephebes of a particular tribe.
9. Vidal-Naquet 1988b. See also Vidal-Naquet 1986b, 135–36.
10. Vidal-Naquet 1988b, 174–75.
11. Polinskaya 2003. Ober (1985) offers a thorough discussion of the relevant evidence for Athens’ border garrisons.
12. Hansen 1999, 89.
13. Di Benedetto 1978; Lambert 1993, 149; Hesk 2000, 86–89; Rehm 2002, 139; Dodd 2003, 76–80; Fletcher 2011, 90; Gregory 2012, 516.
14. Winnington-Ingram 1979, 10; Dodd 2003, 72–76; Polinskaya 2003.

15. Though scholarly opinion runs the gamut. Pélékidis (1962, 19–79) places the creation of the formal *ephebeia* sometime in the course of the fifth century; Friend (2009, 57–97) argues that the formal institution came into existence only after Alexander's destruction of Thebes in 335 BCE, suggesting that the law of Epicrates marks the creation of the *ephebeia*; Ober (1985, 90–95) places its creation in the first half of the fourth century on the basis of Aeschines' mention of *sunepheboi* in *On the Embassy* (2.167) and the establishment of the position of *strategos* of the *chora* in 352/1 BCE. Vidal-Naquet (1986a, 106–28), of course, supports a date for the *ephebeia* that makes it contemporary with the presentation of the *Philoctetes* in 409 BCE. Whitehead (1986, 104n95), Lambert (1993, 149–50), and Hansen (1999, 89) all support a post-409 date.

16. The oath survives in a mid-fourth-century Acharnian inscription published as Rhodes and Osborne 88 (2003, 440–49) = *SEG* 21.519. See also Siewert 1977. Additional versions of the oath's text are found at Lycurg. 1.77, Poll. 8.105–6, and Stob. *Flor.* 43.48. Goldhill (1990, 124–25) and Farenga (2006, 353) note the difficulty the late date of the inscription poses for discussing the ephebe as related specifically to Attic tragedy.

17. Siewert 1977, 104–7; McCulloch and Cameron 1980, 1–14. On echoes of the ephebic oath in the *Antigone*, see also Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, 144. Supporting the position that traces of the oath are discernible in fifth-century literature, Rhodes and Osborne (2003, 445–46, 449) argue that the vocabulary used in the oath from the fourth-century Acharnian inscription is archaic and that the oath aligns better with fifth-century practice than fourth-century, in both language and procedure. “The version of the ephebic oath which the *stele* preserves,” they suggest, “confirms beyond reasonable doubt the antiquity of that oath” (2003, 449). See also Ober 1985, 91n14.

18. Vidal-Naquet 1988b, 161–62, 169–70.

19. Or, at least, certainly the first two. Whitehead (1986, 104) and Hansen (1999, 89) discuss the possibility that in some cases inscription in the assembly register may have occurred only after an intervening period of garrison service.

20. *Lycurg.* 1.76 suggests that the oath and the acquisition of status were simultaneous, describing the oath as sworn by all citizens whenever they were inscribed in the deme register and became ephebes (ἐπειδὴν εἰς τὸ ληξιαρχικὸν γραμματεῖον ἐγγραφῶσι καὶ ἔφηβοι γένωνται). Vidal-Naquet (1988b, 162, 452n6) notes that the ancient evidence supports both this alternative and its opposite: namely, that ephebes swore the ephebic oath only after completing the *ephebeia*.

21. Indeed, as Fletcher (2008, 35–36) points out, it is implied throughout the play that Neoptolemus, as an immature male, is not capable of swearing oaths, a strictly adult prerogative.

22. Heath 1999, 152–53.

23. Lambert 1993, 31–42, 162–67; Jones 1999, 195–99; Parker 2005, 210. On the Apatouria more generally, see Vidal-Naquet 1986a, 108–10; Lambert 1993, 143–89; Parker 2005, 458–61. See also Rhodes and Osborne (2003, 26–28) = *IG* II² 1237, a phratry decree from Decelea dating to 396/5 BCE that discusses the ritual admission of youths.

24. Vidal-Naquet 1986a, 99; Lambert 1993, 170; Parker 2005, 458; Farenga 2006, 357.

25. According to J. Roisman (2005, 11), the appropriate term for a youth before he became an ephebe was usually *meirakion*, but this word does not appear in Sophocles' play. In fact, Neoptolemus is consistently called *teknon* or *pais* by the other characters, emphasizing his youth by the use of vocabulary that is also appropriate for very young children.

26. Lambert 1993, 145–46; Polinskaya 2003, 87. An alternative etymology, proposed by Vidal-Naquet (1986a, 110), followed by Mitchell-Boyask (1999, 50), is that the alpha at the beginning of "Apatouria" is copulative and indicates a festival *with* the father.

27. H. Roisman 2005, 88. See also Whitby 1996, 39; Kyriakou 2012, 152n7.

28. As many have noted. On this metaphorical competition over Neoptolemus' paternity, see Adams 1957, 156; Avery 1965, 285–96; Erbse 1966, 182; Knox 1966, 123–26; Segal 1981, 320; Blundell 1988, 138–39; Gibert 1995, 149–50; Lada-Richards 1998, 10; Badger 2000, 192; H. Roisman 2005, 91–94; Austin 2011, 55; Woodruff 2012, 135–36; van Nortwick 2015, 47.

29. *Ath. Pol.* 42.1; Whitehead 1986, 97–104; Lambert 1993, 171–73; Hansen 1999, 96.

30. Lambert (1993, 149–51) shows that while the myth is certainly old enough to suit Vidal-Naquet's argument about the *Philoctetes*, it can be only tenuously linked with the ephebe and the *ephebeia*. He explains (1993, 150–51): "The only apparent connection between what we know of the details of the [Apatouria] festival and the ephebeia, apart from the obvious fact that at least some of those introduced to phratries at the Apatouria would have gone on to become ephebes, is the black cloaks allegedly worn by both ephebes and participants at the Apatouria. . . . The connection between the ephebeia and the Apatouria, either in its broad themes or its detailed features, at any pre-Hellenistic date seems weak."

31. See Vidal-Naquet 1986a, 108–12; Winkler 1990, 23–25; Lambert 1993, 144–45. On other etymologies, see above, p. 115 and n. 26.

32. And, indeed, J. Roisman (2005, 11–25) identifies deceptiveness as among the constellation of attributes typically assigned to youths in Classical Athens.

33. Poe 1974, 11–12; Easterling 1977, 126; Greengard 1987, 26; Ringer 1998, 107.

34. Adams 1957, 140; Hamilton 1975, 132–33; Roberts 1989, 170.

35. Erbse 1966, 178, 192, and Calder 1971.

36. Seale 1972, 98–100; Winnington-Ingram 1979, 10.

37. On the great distance between Lemnos and the ritual realities of the fifth century, see Lada-Richards 1998, 20n6; Goff 1999, 110; Polinskaya 2003, 85; Fletcher 2011, 90.

38. Goyens-Slezakowa 1992 argues that Philoctetes' experiences on Lemnos fit an initiatory paradigm as well, but that of the shaman rather than that of the ephebe. While perhaps Philoctetes' time on Lemnos could be understood as initiatory in the loosest sense, most of these initiatory motifs are expressed in such covert, metaphorical terms that they are unlikely to have had any significant impact on the audience's perception of the exile's ritual status.

39. Mitchell-Boyask 2007, 108.

40. Mitchell-Boyask 2007, 108.

41. Vickers 1987, 171–87; 2008, 59–81; Bowie 1997, 56–61; Mitchell-Boyask 2007, 105–6.

42. Indeed, Rehm (2002, 138–55) analyzes the *Philoctetes* as a rare example of a play that unfolds entirely in what he calls “eremitic space,” a space that is desolate not because of its physical or geographical isolation but because of its lack of human beings.

43. Segal 1981, 294–95. Philoctetes’ situation offers an illustration of a concept that Aristotle would later articulate explicitly in the *Politics*: that the man who is incapable of coexisting with others or who has no need to do so because of his self-sufficiency has no part in the *polis*, with the result that he is either beast or god (ὁ δὲ μὴ δυνάμενος κοινωνεῖν ἢ μὴδὲν δεόμενος δι’ αὐτάρκειαν οὐθὲν μέρος πόλεως, ὥστε ἢ θηρίον ἢ θεός, *Pol.* 1253a27–29).

44. See Jebb 1898, xxviii; Buxton 1982, 119–20; Ringer 1998, 104.

45. Feder 1963. See also Linforth 1956, 133–34, 156; Taplin 1978, 49–50; Badger 2000, 190–91; Schein 2001, 38; Rehm 2002, 152–53.

46. Buxton 1982, 120.

47. Segal 1963, 39; Avery 1965, 282; Seale 1982, 26; Ussher 1990, 143.

48. Blundell 1989, 194.

49. Stephens 1995; Austin 2011, 44–45.

50. Schein 2001, 40.

51. Only gods, like Persephone and Hermes, and heroes with special dispensation could exist on both sides of the divide. As we have seen, this is a quality that Philoctetes shares with other Sophoclean heroes, particularly Ajax and Heracles. See “Part I—The Sacrificial Slaughter of the Herds” in chapter 2 and “Ritual Status” in chapter 1, respectively.

52. As many have noted. See Segal 1981, 327, 357–58; Greengard 1987, 43–47; Vidal-Naquet 1988b, 168; Schein 2001, 46; Nooter 2012, 128–30; van Nortwick 2015, 61.

53. See Kamerbeek 1980, 136, on the association of σκιά and καπνός with the dead in Greek thought.

54. Knox 1966, 129; Easterling 1978, 37; Segal 1981, 358; Austin 2011, 13–14.

55. Again, a characteristic that emphasizes his similarity to both Ajax and Heracles in his profound isolation. See n. 51.

56. Scholarly disagreement about the exact terms of the prophecy confirms its ambiguous presentation. Some assert that the merchant conveys the true prophecy (Knox 1966, 126; Easterling 1978, 32–34); some claim that the terms of the prophecy become clear when Neoptolemus makes his final bid to persuade Philoctetes to go to Troy (Kieffer 1942, 48; Alt 1961, 168; Erbse 1966, 183–84; Hinds 1967, 170; Taplin 1971, 37–38; Gill 1980, 141); some argue that the gods’ will is fully clear only when confirmed by Heracles’ appearance *ex machina* (Kirkwood 1958, 273; Hinds 1967, 170; Kamerbeek 1980, 9). Ultimately, the terms of the oracle are never made completely clear. See Craik 1979, 20; Buxton 1982, 130; Kyriakou 2012, 160n16; van Nortwick 2015, 69.

57. Adams 1957, 147; Robinson 1969, 49; Gellie 1972, 144; Roberts 1989, 171; Ringer 1998, 114.

58. Adams 1957, 137; Alt 1961, 147; Erbse 1966, 183; Segal 1977, 140.

59. Many commentators have understood Neoptolemus’ assertion at 839–42 to have the weight of divine sanction on account of their composition in oracular dactylic hexameters (Alt 1961, 158; Jebb 1898, 137; Gellie 1972, 149; Segal 1977, 145; Ussher 1990, 139; Bowra

1944, 281; Budelmann 2000, 127; Flashar 2000, 156; Austin 2011, 129; van Nortwick 2015, 61). However, there is no reason to trust his account of the prophecy over any of the other versions presented in the play. His reliability is compromised by his emotions and motivations, as is that of the other characters who convey a version of the prophecy.

60. Whitman 1951, 182–83. See also Segal 1977, 141–42; Gill 1980, 142; Blundell 1987, 312.

61. Alt 1961, 144.

62. Garner 1990, 28–40; Perysinakis 1992, 1994; Davidson 1995; Bowie 1997, 59–61; Davidson 2012, 257–58; Schein 2012, 431–37; 2013, 15–17; van Nortwick 2015, 44–45.

63. Greengard 1987, 63.

64. Seale 1982, 41.

65. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 282; Seale 1982, 29; Flashar 2000, 149.

66. Naiden 2006, 3–4, and *passim*. Naiden (2006, 335) identifies two such sequences in the *Philoctetes*. On supplication, see “Supplication” in chapter 1.

67. Naiden (2006, 335n3) suggests that Neoptolemus “betrays” Philoctetes because he does not grant him the nod that he asks for at line 484. However, I take Neoptolemus’ suggestion, “Let us sail” (πλέωμεν, 526), as the fourth step of Naiden’s progression. It seems clear enough that his offer to take Philoctetes with him on his ship is an assurance that he does not intend to leave him on the island, thus granting Philoctetes’ suppliant request. That Neoptolemus has incurred a ritual obligation by his words in this scene is widely recognized. See Kamerbeek 1980, 83; White 1985, 15–16; Hogan 1991, 336; Belfiore 1994, 121–24; Belfiore 1998, 153, 157–58; Heath 1999, 149–50.

68. Sommerstein and Torrance 2014, 1–2. On oaths, see “Oaths and Other Verval Rituals” in chapter 1.

69. Both Torrance (2014, 95–100) and Fletcher (2011, 93) argue that this handclasp represents not an actual oath but rather a pledge. For my purposes, it matters only that it is clear that Neoptolemus is making a ritual commitment to Philoctetes to behave in a certain way in the future. Whether this is specifically an “oath” or a “pledge” is ultimately not important for my argument.

70. Torrance (2014, 97–100) discusses Philoctetes’ misrepresentation of Neoptolemus’ promise (here and later in the play) as what she calls a “Sophoclean oath,” the phrase she uses to refer to assertions not originally formulated as oaths (in this case, the handclasp) that are later treated retroactively as oaths. While I do not see as large a discrepancy between the ritual significance of Neoptolemus’ initial promise and Philoctetes’ later interpretation of it as Torrance does—in other words, I do not see the handclasp as any less serious a ritual commitment on Neoptolemus’ part than if he had sworn an oath more explicitly—Torrance and I are very much in agreement on Philoctetes’ distortion of what Neoptolemus promised and on the fact that this ritual exchange sheds light on their evolving relationship.

71. Naiden (2006, 335) contends that the supplication is complete and that when Philoctetes describes Neoptolemus turning away (ὤδ’ ὁρᾷ πάλιν, 935), this is tantamount to the youth’s saying no. However, Neoptolemus’ subsequent *aporia* speaks against this interpretation. Before Odysseus arrives onstage, Neoptolemus is trying to determine whether to

grant Philoctetes' request. Odysseus' authoritative adult presence precludes his giving an answer.

72. Naiden (2006, 335) interprets this as a reversal of Neoptolemus' earlier ritual refusal.

73. Pace Fletcher (2008, 35–36), who argues that Neoptolemus' agreement to honor an oath that he never swore is a mark of maturity rather than youth, and a sign of his new adult commitment to an adult institution.

74. Taplin (1971, 38) articulates this idea well: "Turning the pages back (as an audience cannot) we find that all that Neoptolemus promised there was to stay with Philoctetes (810, 812, 813): neither there nor anywhere else, neither deceitfully nor sincerely, did he promise or swear to take Philoctetes home. Yet Sophocles makes us feel that morally Neoptolemus is committed to this undertaking after everything that has gone before." Where Taplin attributes the audience's response to a generic sense of morality, I argue that ritual better accounts for the audience's reaction at this point in the play.

75. Hoppin (1990, 142–49) offers an excellent analysis of the closural features of this moment in the play. See also Robert 1991, 305–6; Schein 2001, 42–43.

76. The bow was an ambivalent weapon in fifth-century thought, which makes its shifting significance in this play particularly difficult to pin down. The *agon* between Lycus and Amphitryon in Euripides' *Heracles* offers a particularly clear example of the ambiguous connotations of archery (*HF* 159–64, 188–203). Heraclitus' pithy fragment about the bow offers the same sentiment more briefly: "the name of the bow is life; its work is death" (τὸ τόξον ὄνομα βίος ἔργον δὲ θάνατος, DK B48). In fifth-century discourse, the bow is as often a symbol of barbaric cowardice as heroic achievement. Barbaric cowardice: *Pers.* 147–49; Sage 1996, xix, 90; van Wees 2004, 175–76. Heroic achievement: Thuc. 2.13.8; *IG* I¹ 1147 (the Erechtheid casualty list, which inscribes the names of fallen archers); van Wees 2004, 62–65, 227. On the shifting symbolism of the bow in the *Philoctetes*, see Taplin 1978, 89–93; Fletcher 2013, 202–10; van Nortwick 2015, 57.

77. Belfiore 1994; 1998, 153, 157–58.

78. Segal 1981, 295; H. Roisman 2005, 99–100.

79. Lada-Richards 1997, 180–83; 1998, 3–4, 14.

80. Fletcher 2011, 71, 89–99.

81. Gill 1980, 139; Segal 1981, 295; Blundell 1989, 204–5; H. Roisman 2005, 99.

82. Fletcher 2011, 71, 98–99.

83. Fletcher 2011, 89. For a broader discussion of the many parallels between Homer's Telemachus and Sophocles' Neoptolemus that suggest deliberate modeling on Sophocles' part, see Whitby 1996.

84. On this paradox, see Ringer 1998, 117: "The bow hints not only at Philoctetes' strength, his heroic status built out of his friendship with Heracles, but also, paradoxically, at Philoctetes' weakness—the strangely fragmentary nature of his heroism."

85. Robert 1991, 307.

86. Ussher 1990, 150.

87. Whitman 1951, 177; Robinson 1969, 53–55; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 301–2.

88. This second ending has generated a huge amount of discussion, which tends to revolve around a few key ideas: the personal connection between Philoctetes and Heracles (Linforth 1956, 115; Feder 1963, 39–40; Erbse 1966, 200; Hamilton 1975, 135–36; Kamerbeek 1980, 188; Greengard 1987, 62–63; Flashar 2000, 159; Schein 2001; Taplin 1978, 68–69); the Euripidean quality of this surprising *deus ex machina* (Robinson 1969, 55; Garvie 1972, 226; H. Roisman 2005, 111); and Heracles' divine authority (Adams 1957, 159; Harsh 1960, 408; E. Wilson 1965, 241; Jebb 1898, 271; Gellie 1972, 155; Hamilton 1975, 131, 137; Greengard 1987, 89; Blundell 1989, 223; Herzog 2006, 26), particularly the distinction between the play's earlier human *logoi* and Heracles' divine *mythoi* (Podlecki 1966, 244–45; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 299; Segal 1981, 337; Ussher 1990, 10; Pucci 1994; van Nortwick 2015, 133n55).

89. Hoppin (1990) arrives at the same conclusion, though using metrical rather than ritual analysis. She shows that both of the *Philoctetes*' endings are marked with strong clausal effects, but that the second ending, without completely overturning the resolution that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes reach independently, is validated as the true conclusion to the play.

90. Heracles' designation as role model here may be generic or very specific. As Hesychius notes in his entry on the *Oinisteria*, with details confirmed in Eup. fr. 146, Poll. 6.22, and Ath. 11.494, youths who were about to be recognized by their phratry dedicated a measure of wine to Heracles as part of the ritual lead-up to their fathers' swearing to their legitimacy (Lambert 1993, 163; Parker 2005, 437, 458; Salowey 2015, 379–80). Moreover, it is surely no coincidence that Heracles is named specifically in the existing versions of the ephebic oath (in section VIII: see Siewert 1977, 103), with its exhortation to young men to stand by their fellow citizens in the battle ranks. Heracles' appearance at the end of the *Philoctetes* and his direct association with adolescent rites of passage in Athens—alluding to both the *Apatouria* and to *deme* initiation—has important implications for the status of the youthful Neoptolemus in the eyes of the contemporary audience.

91. On Heracles' appeal to the *charis* of friendship, see Schein 2001, 44–45.

92. As both Ussher (1990, 161–62) and Jouanna (2007, 304–5) refer to it.

93. Vidal-Naquet (1988b, 174–75) notes that Heracles' instructions to Neoptolemus and Philoctetes to watch over each other at Troy reflect the clause in the ephebic oath in which a new ephebe swore to defend his fellow hoplite warriors. Vidal-Naquet interprets this as evidence that Neoptolemus has graduated from ephebe to hoplite status over the course of the play. My contention is that the play only anticipates this transition and does not actually effect it.

94. On Neoptolemus' future impieties, see Blundell 1988, 146; Belfiore 1994, 128; Schein 2001, 49–51; Rehm 2002, 145–49; Schein 2012, 435.

Chapter 5. Supplication in the *Oedipus at Colonus*

1. Linforth 1951, 73–81.

2. Hester (1977, 22) and Winnington-Ingram (1980, 255) both explicitly challenge this Christian reading of the play.

3. On supplication in ancient Greece “Supplication” in chapter 1.
4. J. Wilson 1997, 29–63.
5. See Bowra 1944, 310–11; Zeitlin 1970, 147–48; Burian 1974; Reinhardt 1979, 195–96; Burton 1980, 273; Krummen 1993, 198; Jouanna 1995; Walker 1995, 173; Belfiore 1998, 153, 157–58; Ringer 1998, 94; Flashar 2000, 167–68; Markantonatos 2007, 125–28; Kelly 2009, 75–76, 85; Hesk 2012, 179–80; Tzanetou 2012, 105–26.
6. Burian 1974.
7. Zeitlin 1970, 148–49.
8. In his appendix listing every act of supplication in Greek literature, Naiden (2006, 335) identifies only three in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. First is Oedipus’ supplication of the Furies (Eumenides), which Naiden suggests is accepted by Theseus on the Furies’ behalf at line 641; second is Polyneices’ supplication at the altar of Poseidon of Colonus for the right to speak with Oedipus; third is the actual supplication of Oedipus by his son. Naiden’s summary overlooks several acts of supplication in the play, which are irregular but nonetheless clearly identifiable as supplication by their language.
9. Krummen 1993, 196.
10. These ritual movements of separation and integration correspond to aspects of van Gennep’s ritual theory (see “Sophoclean Rituals and Ritual Theory” in the introduction). As Segal (1981, 385) has noted, the entire play enacts a highly complex version of the rite of passage.
 11. Minadeo 1990b, 63; Flashar 2000, 178; Jouanna 2007, 514.
 12. Brown 1984, 265.
 13. Lloyd-Jones 1990, 207; Henrichs 1991, 169–70; Robertson 2010, 89.
 14. Adams 1957, 165; Brown 1984, 277.
 15. See Farnell 1909, 437; Brown 1984, 262; Lloyd-Jones 1990, 208–11; Henrichs 1991, 163–79; Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky 1993, 79; Robertson 2010, 85, 105–6.
 16. Jebb 1900, xii; Farnell 1909, 442; Winnington-Ingram 1954, 18n17, 23n42; Knox 1966, 148n12; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 272–73; Kamerbeek 1982, 42; Kamerbeek 1984, 30; Lardinois 1992, 316–18; Morin 1996, 295–96; Mills 1997, 163; Lloyd-Jones 1990, 209–10; 1998b, 416 n. a; Tilg 2004, 409–11; Kelly 2009, 71–72; Robertson 2010, 106.
 17. Wüst (1956, cols. 112–17) gives an extensive list of their associations. See also Farnell 1909, 437–41; Brown 1984, 261; Lloyd-Jones 1990, 204–7; Henrichs 1991, 163–79; Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky 1993, 790–81; Robertson 2010, 96, 105.
 18. Farnell (1909, 441), Winnington-Ingram (1954, 22n43), Lloyd-Jones (1990, 206–7), and Henrichs (1991, 166–67) all discuss the way in which earth goddesses in particular are often represented as having a dual nature in Greek religion. This is reflected in their common duplication: for example, Demeter and Kore.
 19. Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky 1993, 79. This is not to say that the Eumenides/Semnai Theai/Erinyes did not receive a huge range of epithets as well. See Wüst 1956, cols. 86–91.
 20. See Brown 1984, 261, and especially Robertson 2010, 85, 97.
 21. Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky 1993, 80–81.

22. On the very different ways in which Oedipus and his son view these goddesses, see Morin 1996, 296.
23. Brown 1984, 278 and *passim*. See also Winnington-Ingram 1954, 18–23.
24. Wiles 1997. For similar analysis, see Segal 1981, 371–72; Birge 1984, 14–17; Kamerbeek 1984, 106; Taaffe 1986, 215–16; Calame 1998b, 340–41; Carey 2009, 128; van Nortwick 2012, 146–47.
25. Pace Linforth (1951, 94), who, in keeping with his strictly nonreligious reading of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, argues that the Eumenides are an arbitrary selection on Sophocles' part and that the Pythia could have specified that Oedipus would end his life in any location associated with any divinity with the same results.
26. The grove and its surroundings are particularly emphasized in the description of the purification ritual (466–92), in the Chorus's ode to Athens after Theseus has welcomed Oedipus (668–719), in the Chorus's ode during the battle over Oedipus' daughters (1044–95), and in the final ritual accompanying Oedipus' death and its description (especially 1586–1666).
27. Taaffe 1986, 213–14.
28. For Oedipus' associations with the Eumenides/Erinyes before coming to Colonus, see Wüst 1956, cols. 108–9; Méautis 1940, 41–42; Edmunds 1981, 227–28. A fifth-century Athenian audience might also have been aware of Oedipus' association with the Erinyes in cult practice at Sicyon, Potniai, Cithaeron, and on the Areopagus (Edmunds 1981, 227–28).
29. This is, of course, an extremely common way of discussing Oedipus' character and the *Oedipus at Colonus* more generally. For a few of many examples, see Bowra 1944, 311–14; Kitto 1961 392–93; Burian 1974; Hester 1977, 25–26; Edmunds 1981, 228–31; Segal 1981, 374–75; Blundell 1989, 257; Bernidaki-Aldous 1990; Minadeo 1990b, 61, 76–77; Zeitlin 1990, 133–34, 139; Mills 1997, 168n28; Kelly 2009, 74, 121–22; Tzanetou 2012, 107–8.
30. See Henrichs 1983; Tzanetou 2012, 107–9.
31. Carey 2009, 131–32.
32. Edmunds (1981, 227) also notes that Oedipus' name, like many epithets of the Eumenides, is a *-πους* compound. This is, perhaps, a weaker means of demonstrating the affinity between Oedipus and the Eumenides, since none of these epithets is used to describe the goddesses directly in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. There is, however, a *χαλκόπους ὁδός* (56) in their grove.
33. Morin 1996, 298–300. See also Gellie 1972, 161; Seaford 1994, 134; Carey 2009, 128; Tzanetou 2012, 110.
34. Jouanna 1995, 44.
35. Allison 1984, 89.
36. J. Wilson 1997, 44–45.
37. Seale 1982, 115; Kelly 2009, 121.
38. Singh Dhuga 2005, 344–47.
39. Krummen 1993, 198; Jouanna 1995, 54–55; Markantonatos 2007, 170.
40. See, for example, Zeitlin 1970, 142; J. Wilson 1997, 48–49.

41. Kamerbeek 1984, 82–83; Burkert 1985b, 12; Gardiner 1987, III; Jouanna 1995, 48.
42. Linforth 1951, 141; Jouanna 1995, 47.
43. See, for example, Zeitlin 1970, 80; Burton 1980, 260; Krummen 1993, 197; Jouanna 1995, 47. *Pace* Henrichs (2004, 195–96), I do not believe that the offstage performance of the ritual raises any real doubt that it is, in fact, performed. Oedipus' acceptance among the Eumenides at the end of the play presupposes the completion of the ritual.
44. Zeitlin 1970, 90–91; Markantonatos 2002, 39.
45. Markantonatos 2007, 129.
46. *Pace* Reinhardt (1979, 205), who describes the purification as an initiation into the cult of the Eumenides, and Gellie (1972, 168), who claims that “the scene is a formalized rite of supplication and acceptance.”
47. Gould 1973, 94–95.
48. While LSJ suggests “petition” for προστροπή in this specific context (2), it lists “supplication” as the word's first definition. LSJ also lists the use of προστροπή to mean “supplication” in tragedy at *Eum.* 718, citing a play that has a great deal of thematic overlap with the *Oedipus at Colonus* in staging the acceptance of suppliant outsiders in Athens. Despite its irregularities, the scene in which Theseus receives Oedipus in Athens is clearly marked as a supplication scene.
49. Burian (1974, 416) notes the inversion of a typical supplication in having the suppliant rather than the *supplicandus* bring up the possibility of war.
50. Minadeo 1990b, 67. Cf. Naiden 2006, 335.
51. Such arguments depend on the interpretation of a single half line of text: χώρα δ' ἔμπαλιν (or ἔμπολιν) κατοικιῶ (637). The manuscripts give ἔμπαλιν (“On the contrary, I shall settle him in the country”), but most modern editors prefer Musgrave's emendation to ἔμπολιν (“I shall settle him as a citizen/inhabitant in the country”). For recent discussion on this ongoing debate, see especially J. Wilson 1997, 64–67; Tzanetou 2012, 127–28.
52. Zeitlin 1990, 156.
53. Burian 1974, 420.
54. Hester 1977, 28; Zeitlin 1990, 133; Krummen 1993, 198–99; Edmunds 1996, 117–20; Morin 1996, 288.
55. Allison 1984, 83–84; Vidal-Naquet 1988a, 329; Blundell 1989, 232; Krummen 1993, 200.
56. Kelly 2009, 132.
57. See Segal 1981, 403–4.
58. As both Easterling (2006, 142–43) and Markantonatos (2007, 132–33) discuss. On death ritual, see “Funerary Ritual” in chapter 1.
59. On the conflation of life and death in this scene, see Calame 1998b, 340–41; Easterling 2006, 142–43; Markantonatos 2007, 137. This is similar to the ritual conflation that occurs in the *Ajax*, where the hero is variously portrayed as both mourner and corpse, officiant and victim, a person in need of protection and a source of protection. See chapter 2.
60. Lloyd-Jones 1990, 210; Jouanna 1995, 45–49.

61. Henrichs 1991, 174–79.
62. On Oedipus as hero, see especially Linforth 1951, 98–103; Hester 1977; Edmunds 1981; Birge 1984; Lardinois 1992, 323–27; Seaford 1994, 129–42; J. Wilson 1997, 168–85; Calame 1998b; Markantonatos 2007, 140–55.
63. Calame (1998b, 345), Markantonatos (2007, 155), and Kelly (2009, 81) all discuss the association between secrecy and the hero's grave.
64. See Burkert 1985a, 194; Seaford 1994, 109–42.
65. See, for example, Méautis 1940 or any of the entries in Hägg 1999 or Albersmeier 2009.
66. Méautis 1957, 153; Kamerbeek 1984, 100; Seaford 1994, 114.
67. There is insufficient evidence to determine whether Sophocles' account reflects contemporary cult practice at Colonus or whether the playwright's description of Oedipus' death contributed to the subsequent development of such rites. While other panhellenic traditions place Oedipus' grave at Thebes and a variant Attic tradition locates it on the Areopagus, there is certainly a tradition of his burial and hero cult at Colonus *after* Sophocles wrote the *Oedipus at Colonus*. On the basis of the account of Oedipus' burial at Colonus from the fourth-century Attidographer Androtion, Edmunds (1996, 95–96) suggests that Sophocles likely altered an existing popular narrative about the burial for his own dramatic purposes. On Oedipus' historical hero cult, see Colchester 1942, 23; Adams 1957, 162–63; Edmunds 1981; 1996, 95–100; Hogan 1991, 120; Lardinois 1992, 323–27; Morin 1996, 281; Mills 1997, 162n10; Grethlein 2003, 255–58; Kelly 2009, 41–43; Hesk 2012, 177.
68. The most thorough accounts of the Eleusinian elements in the final ritual of the play are found in Colchester 1942, 24–28; Bernidaki-Aldous 1990, 193–212; Calame 1998b; Markantonatos 2002, 197–220; 2007, 135–40. More briefly, see also Rosenmeyer 1952, 104–5; Mills 1997, 163; Calame 1998b, 349–50; Grethlein 2003, 304–6; Tilg 2004, 416; Easterling 2006, 139–42; Kelly 2009, 81–82.
69. Markantonatos 2002, 203–4.
70. Rosenmeyer 1952, 104–5; Edmunds 1981, 229; Calame 1998b, 349–54.
71. Markantonatos 2002, 197–220.
72. Colchester 1942, 27; Edmunds 1981, 229; Markantonatos 2002, 204–5; Easterling 2006, 143–44.
73. Wüst 1956, cols. 94–101; Edmunds 1981, 229; Brown 1984, 264; Lloyd-Jones 1990, 206–7, 210; Tilg 2004, 415.
74. Markantonatos 2007, 135.
75. Seaford 1994, 130–31. This resonates with the portrayal of Ajax's suicide. See “Part II—The Sacrificial Suicide” in chapter 2.
76. Easterling 2006, 135–36.
77. Wiles 1997, 146. In the remainder of his article, Wiles discusses additional opposing associations that these exits accumulate as the play progresses.
78. Wiles 1997, 165.
79. Morin 1996, 300; Carey 2009, 128.
80. Cf. Goff (2004, 356–59), who argues that this play, throughout but especially in

the experiences of Antigone and Ismene in the *exodos*, offers an illustration of “the Theban disease, constituted by the inability of ritual to achieve completion and success” (2004, 357).

81. Kamerbeek 1984, 233.

82. Carey 2009, 133.

83. The exception is Heracles at the end of the *Trachiniae*. But even this mightiest of heroes is denied full closure by Sophocles because his apotheosis, which will similarly entail integration into a nonhuman community, is only anticipated and not accomplished within the bounds of the play.

Conclusion

1. Poe 1987, 16.

2. The standard works on literary closure are Kermode 1967 and Smith 1968. Roberts, Dunn, and Fowler (1997) examine closure in Classical literature more specifically, though none of the chapters in their edited collection considers Sophocles in detail. The introductory note to the bibliography in this volume (1997, 275–77) is extremely helpful, as are Fowler’s (1997) and Roberts’ (1997) introductory and concluding remarks (see also Fowler 1989). Dunn’s (1996) investigation of closure in the Euripidean corpus is excellent, though his observations are often not easily applied to the plays of Sophocles. On Sophoclean endings specifically, Roberts 1987 and 1988 are most helpful.

3. Segal 1996. See also Goward 1999, 50–51.

4. See Dunn 1996, chap. 4.

5. Easterling 2004, 157–59.

6. Roberts 1988, 188–91. Cf. Smith (1968, 210), who suggests that lack of closure or weak closure can arise “when the last allusions are to beginnings or unstable events.”

7. Segal 1996, 161. See also Roberts 1993, 573–75, 583–85; Derderian 2001, 138–39.

8. Segal 1996, 158.

9. For bibliography, see Burian 2009, 99n1.

10. Though Burian 2009 is right to stress that this ending is deliberately indeterminate, combining elements that produce a strong sense of formal closure with those that deny closure. Some of these closural cues, as Burian (2009, 107) himself notes, are conveyed in ritual terms: for example, the expression of Oedipus’ complete tragic reversal through his transformation from *supplicandus* to suppliant.

11. See “Heracles *ex machina*” in chapter 4, especially n. 94.

12. A quality Roberts 1988 attributes to all of Sophocles’ plays.

13. See Grethlein 2003, 314–16.

14. Brooks 1984, 19. While Brooks’s analysis refers to the novel, his ideas are certainly applicable to tragedy. Roberts (1987, 56) makes essentially the same point about Sophoclean and Euripidean drama more specifically: “We expect to experience the end of a work not only as the place where the work stops and loose ends are tied up but as the point at which we look back and make the final revision of our interpretation.”

15. Roberts 1988, 194.

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